

# on spec

the canadian magazine of the fantastic



Claude **Lalumière**

Craig **Strickland**

Melissa **Hardy**

Terry **Hayman**

Patricia **Dischner**

Joshua **Prowse**

Randy D. **Ashburn**

A.B. **Goelman**

Steve **Mohn**

Carolyn **Clink**

nonfiction by Jena **Snyder**

FALL 2003 \$5.95  
[www.onspec.ca](http://www.onspec.ca)

cover art by Dariusz **Jasiczak**

# on spec

## acknowledgements

*The donors listed below have all given generously in the past year. We are grateful for their support.*

### sponsors

Alberta Community Development, Arts Development Branch;  
The Alberta Foundation for the Arts; The Canada Council for the Arts;  
Advanced Education and Career Development; and Clear Lake Ltd.

### patron

Rick LeBlanc and the Infrastructure Network

### supporters

Billie Scott  
Roger Moore

### behind the scenes support

*The continued success of On Spec is possible only because of the generous donation of time and assistance from wonderful people such as:*

Jane Bisbee and Paul Pearson of Alberta Community Development and Alberta Foundation for the Arts; James R. Bernard, Personal Assistant to Ms. Byron; Gerry Dunn and Diane Duczynski, who graciously volunteered their time for our fall donor campaign, and to James Bigras, Derek Blackadder, Richard Collier, Art Davis, Sonya Delisle, Elaine Filax, Margaret Hamilton, Dr. Alfred Hexter, Monica Hughes, Douglas Ivison, Debra McIntyre, Ted Parsons, and Roberta Stevens; Don Bassie and the *Made in Canada* website; Merrill Distad and Randy Reichardt of the University of Alberta Library; Gordon Snyder and Cesar Guimbatan of Snyder Fine Arts, Donna McMahon, and Donna Weis.



**Canada Council  
for the Arts**

**Conseil des Arts  
du Canada**

We acknowledge the support of the **Canada Council for the Arts**  
which last year invested \$7.9 million in the arts in Alberta.

Nous remercions de son soutien le **Conseil des Arts du Canada**,  
qui a investi 7,9 millions de dollars l'an dernier dans les arts en Alberta.



**The Alberta  
Foundation  
for the Arts**



COMMITTED TO THE DEVELOPMENT OF CULTURE AND THE ARTS

Financial support provided by **The Alberta Foundation for the Arts**,  
a beneficiary of Alberta Lotteries.

We acknowledge the financial support of the **Government of Canada**, through the  
**Publications Assistance Program (PAP)**, toward our mailing costs.

## fiction

Njàbò.....	<i>Claude Lalumière</i> .....	6
Meat.....	<i>Craig Strickland</i> .....	18
The Oak Secretary.....	<i>Melissa Hardy</i> .....	28
Dropouts.....	<i>Terry Hayman</i> .....	45
Blood Factors.....	<i>Patricia Dischner</i> .....	52
Under a Full Moon.....	<i>Joshua Prowse</i> .....	64
A Case of Port.....	<i>Randy D. Ashburn</i> .....	72
Dragon's Dust.....	<i>A.B. Goelman</i> .....	84
Rainbow Bridge.....	<i>Steve Mohn</i> .....	96

## poetry

The Kasou of Sam McGee.....	<i>Carolyn Clink</i> .....	61
-----------------------------	----------------------------	----

## nonfiction

Editorial: "The Dreaded Rewrite".....	<i>Jena Snyder</i> .....	3
"Me & Mr. Jones".....	<i>Call for submissions</i> .....	110
About our contributors.....		111

**cover** "Woman in Red Dress" ©2002 Dariusz Jasiczak



# onspec

fall 2003

vol 15 no 3 #54

<i>Publisher:</i>	The Copper Pig Writers' Society		
<i>General Editor:</i>	Diane L. Walton		
<i>Art Director:</i>	Derryl Murphy		
<i>Poetry Editor:</i>	Barry Hammond		
<i>Art Advisor:</i>	Gordon Snyder		
<i>Production Editor:</i>	Jena Snyder		
<i>Fiction Editors:</i>	Susan MacGregor	Holly Phillips	Jena Snyder
	Diane L. Walton	Peter Watts	
<i>Executive Assistant:</i>	Beverly Byron		
<i>Publisher's Assistant:</i>	Lynette Bondarchuk		
<i>Cover Artist:</i>	Dariusz Jasiczak		
<i>Webmaster:</i>	Rick LeBlanc, The Infrastructure Network		

*On Spec* is published quarterly through the volunteer efforts of the Copper Pig Writers' Society, a nonprofit society. Annual subscriptions are \$22.00 in Canada for individuals and \$30.00 for institutions (price includes GST). GST # 123625295. Full subscription rates on page 5.

Send all mail (letters, submissions, subscription requests or queries, art samples, advertising rate card, etc.) to *On Spec*, Box 4727, Edmonton, AB T6E 5G6. Ph: (780) 413-0215. Fax: (780) 413-1538. Email: [onspec@onspec.ca](mailto:onspec@onspec.ca).

Please note: we do not read emailed fiction, poetry, or nonfiction submissions. Artwork and nonfiction are commissioned only. For contributors' guidelines, payment schedule, and complete back issue details, see our web page ([www.onspec.ca](http://www.onspec.ca)).

No portion of this magazine may be reproduced without consent from the individual author or artist.

Publication and promotion of this issue have been made possible by financial assistance from Alberta Community Development, Cultural Industries Branch; The Alberta Foundation for the Arts; The Canada Council for the Arts; the Department of Canadian Heritage; Alberta Advanced Education and Career Development; and Clear Lake Ltd.

*On Spec* is a member of the Canadian Magazine Publishers' Association (CMPA), and is distributed in Canada by CMPA and in the United Kingdom by BBR.

Printed in Canada by Capital Color Press, Edmonton AB

Publications Mail Registration Number 08148  
Postage Paid at Edmonton, Alberta, Canada  
© 2003 The Copper Pig Writers' Society

ISSN 0843-476X  
Email: [onspec@onspec.ca](mailto:onspec@onspec.ca)

*"Hello.  
My name is Jena,  
and I'm a re-write-aholic..."*

# The dreaded rewrite (part 1)

Jena Snyder, Production Editor

AT CONSPEC/CONVERSION/CANVENTION IN CALGARY IN 2002, I participated in a panel called "The Dreaded Rewrite." Since I tend to freeze and go stupid when faced with public speaking, I've learned to be prepared. This is what I came up with in response to the panel question:

*When is enough enough? The difference between a sold and an unsold manuscript is that last rewrite. How do you know when you've reached the selling point?*

**"Hello. My name is Jena , and I'm a re-write-aholic..."**

As one of the fiction editors at *On Spec*, I've found that rewriting usually stops when the editor tells the writer "Forget it—we went to press yesterday." Some authors never stop. Six months after we print a story, an anthology editor buys it, and the author sends a rewritten version. And six months after the anthology comes out, yet another version is up on the author's website.

So when do you *start* rewriting?

*1. Don't start rewriting until you've completed the first draft.*

This doesn't mean you can't add something brilliant that just occurred to you. But get the MS cobbled together, bent and clumsy and skimpy and piecemeal as it might be—what you want to do is capture that first burst of energy, the first idea, and get it down on paper or hard drive before you lose it. I've seen too many writers (including me) lose that initial focus because they've either taken a partial MS to a writers group



or given it to an editor or agent. It doesn't matter who the reader is, your mom or your agent: if they're not seeing the whole MS, they don't know what your ultimate goal is. They don't know that this maybe-awkward chunk is vital, and that without it, your protagonist has no motivation or your ending makes no sense. They might suggest cutting or changing it, or pointing the novel or story in a different direction, and if you're not careful, you might do it.

*2. Don't start rewriting until you've started something else.*

Everybody's heard how you should put a MS away for a while so you can be objective about it when you pick it up again. This is all well and good if you're working on something else a week after typing "The End" on MS #1. But if you haven't let go of it, all you're going to do is tinker, changing a word here and there. It's only when you've been seduced by that new idea that you can start to let go of the old one. I'd give a short story MS at least a month—and a book MS at least 3 months, preferably 6 or more—to mellow, and for you to start to grow away from it.

*3. Don't start rewriting until you've read the MS from start to finish in hard copy.*

This is a joke, coming from me. I never print anything, and I never manage to read through the entire MS without starting to endlessly tinker, tinker, tinker. A good place to read your MS in hard copy would be on a plane. Even better, on a plane where you've already seen and hated the in-flight movie, and the person beside you could bore the spots off a Dalmatian. And no running back to the computer and making changes. Prologue to the end, no exceptions, in one sitting if possible. And no writing implements—the idea is to read from a reader's POV.

*4. Don't start rewriting until you've got something big enough to bother with.*

If you can change it with Search and Replace, it's not big enough. If you've decided your existing protagonist should die in the first chapter and that quirky secondary character with all the great dialogue should take over, and that the story or book really needs to bend more towards horror instead of humor, okay, now go for it.

*5. If you've got comments from your writers group, an editor, or an agent, don't start rewriting until you've considered ALL the comments.*

And stopped bleeding. (NB: If they're all saying the same thing, that's a good place to start.)

*6. Don't start rewriting until you've heard back from the editor or agent.*

You're rarely going to hear "It's brilliant! Don't change a word!" from a book editor or agent, but when they call to talk about the MS, it's useful for you both to be discussing the same MS.

When I was doing the layout for one of our issues, I had a nasty surprise—when the author of a 3000-word story emailed me the file, she neglected to mention that she'd done some rewriting ... and the story was now 5500 words long. And didn't fit. This is the point where I frantically shuffle through everything else I have on hand, discover that apparently no one's writing 3000-word stories because we have nothing under 5000 words, and I end up emailing an author to say "Hi! I know you haven't even returned your contract yet, but could you send me your story file early? Like—within the hour?"

*Coming in our Winter issue: "The Dreaded Rewrite, part 2," including "Rewriting to Editorial Order" and (if space permits) "When do you STOP Rewriting?"*

## Masthead shuffle

I'm extremely pleased to welcome back SUSAN MACGREGOR as one of our fiction editors. Our General Editor, DIANE WALTON, has taken on the role of Executive Director of the Writers Guild of Alberta, and and is glad to have another pair of experienced editorial eyes to read submissions. Susan's timing is perfect, especially since DERRYL MURPHY has decided to step down as Fiction Editor and focus on the art direction of the magazine. ♣

*Can't find on **spec** in your favorite bookstore?*

*Subscribe now and save!*

	<i>Canada:</i>	<i>USA:</i>	<i>Overseas:</i>
1 year	\$22.00	\$22.00 US	\$27.00 US
2 years	\$36.00	\$36.00 US	\$48.00 US
3 years	\$48.00	\$48.00 US	\$62.00 US
Institutional (per year)	\$30.00	\$30.00 US	\$35.00 US

*All prices include GST and shipping and handling!*

Send check or money order to On Spec, Box 4727, Edmonton, AB T6E 5G6. To pay by Visa, include your Visa number, expiry date, name as it is printed on the card, and your signature.

You can also email ([onspec@onspec.ca](mailto:onspec@onspec.ca)), phone (780-413-0215), or fax (780-413-1538) your Visa information to us.

Please indicate whether you want your subscription to start with the current issue or the next issue (i.e. Fall 2003 or Winter 2003).



*Looking at the name on the canvas,  
she is more convinced than ever that  
she had never heard or seen the name  
before it mysteriously came to her eight  
years ago...*

# Njàbò

Claude Lalumière

*NJÀBÒ, MY ONLY CHILD, MY DAUGHTER, WALKS WITH ME. SHE IS AS old as the forest, while I was born but three and a half decades ago. Our ears prick up at the sound of drums. We scan the sky and spot a column of smoke to the northwest. We run towards it. The ground trembles under our feet.*

*The settlement is ringed by rotting carcasses. Their faces are mutilated, but the meat is left uneaten. These are the bodies of our people.*

*I weep, but Njàbò is past tears. She sheds her calf body. Njàbò the great, the wise, the ancient thunders with anger; her flapping ears rouse the wind.*

*Njàbò charges the human settlement, trumpeting her fury. Everywhere there is ivory, carved into jewellery and other trinkets, evidence of the mutilation of our people. She squeezes the life out of the humans and pounds them on the ground. The humans and their houses are crushed beneath the powerful feet of the giant Njàbò. She kicks down the fireplaces and tramples the ashes. She screams her triumph.*

*Njàbò's shouts go on for hours. Our scattered tribe gathers from around the world to the site of Njàbò's victory.*



*Throughout all of this I have been weeping, from pride and awe at Njàbò's beauty, from horror at the deaths of both elephants and humans, from relief, from grief, from sadness and loneliness at my child's independence. And, like too many nights of the past eight years, I wake, quietly weeping, from this dream that is always the same.*

WATERS IS SITTING ON CLEO'S CHEST, NUZZLING HER NOSE, PURRING. CLEO'S cheeks are crusty from dried tears. She guesses that she's been awake for two hours or so. She's been lying on her back—motionless, eyes wide open—trying to forget the dream and the emotions it brings. The skylight above the bed reveals that dawn is breaking. She should get up, get started.

She stretches. It sends Waters leaping from her chest and out through the beaded curtain in the doorway. Cleo slides out of bed, two king-size futons laid side-by-side on the floor. She looks at her lovers in the diffused early-morning light: a domestic ritual that marks the beginning of her day.

Tall, graceful, long-legged Tamara, with her baby-pink skin, rosebud breasts, and long hair dyed in strands of different colors, has kicked off the sheet, lying on her back.

The hard curve of West's shoulder peeks out from under the sheet he holds firmly under his armpit.

Assaad is sleeping on his stomach, his face buried in his pillow, his arm now stretched out over Cleo's pillow, his perfectly manicured feet sticking out from the bed, as always.

And Patrice—gorgeous, broad-shouldered Patrice—isn't back from work yet.

PATRICE COMES HOME FROM THE NIGHT SHIFT AT THE SMALL EASY TO FIND CLEO yawning over the kitchen table, the night's tears not yet washed away. He crouches and hugs her from behind.

"You look so tired, baby." Cleo can hear the smile in his quiet voice, the smile she's always found so irresistible.

She turns and rubs her face against his chest. "I didn't sleep well last night."

Patrice kisses her on the forehead. "Then go back to bed. Let me make breakfast." Again, that smile. She feels herself melting, almost going to sleep in his arms.

"But," she says, yawning, "you've been cooking all night at the café. You should rest."

He laughs and pats her butt. "I'll be all right, Cleo. Allow me the pleasure

of taking care of you, okay?"

She thinks, Can you make my dream go away? But she says nothing. She squeezes his hand, forces a smile, and leaves the kitchen.

FOR A FEW SECONDS, CLEO IS CONFUSED, DOES NOT KNOW WHERE SHE IS. HAS SHE been sleeping? And then she remembers. This is the girls' bedroom, the girls' bed. The curtains are drawn, the door is ajar. What time is it?

She'd quietly snuck into the girls' room after Patrice had come home, careful not to wake them up. She'd crawled in between them and was calmed by their sweet, eight-year-old smells. She had only meant to lie down until Patrice called breakfast. Where were the girls now?

Shouldn't Cleo be smelling tea, pancakes, eggs, toast? Hearing the chaotic banter of the breakfast table?

The kitchen is deserted and wiped clean. Indefatigable Patrice again. No one leaves a kitchen as spotless as he does. She looks at the clock: it's nearly half past noon. She can't remember the last time she slept in. Last night, the dream was more vivid than usual; it drained her.

Her mouth feels dry. She gets orange juice from the fridge and gulps it down. She wanders from room to room. She stops in the bathroom to splash her face.

The quiet is strange. She usually spends the morning and early afternoon tutoring the girls. West must be at the university, Assaad at The Smoke Shop. Patrice, she notices, is sleeping. Waters is curled up on the pillow next to his head. Where are the girls? And then she remembers: Tamara is back. She must have taken them out somewhere.

Tamara has just two days ago returned from a six-month trip to Antarctica. She brought back photographs she'd taken of strange vegetation, species that paleobiologists claim have not grown for millions of years.

Cleo ends her tour of the house with Tamara's office and is startled to see her sitting at her computer, fiddling with the photos from her trip. "Tam?"

"Clee, love, come." Tamara, naked as she almost always is around the house, waves her over. Cleo is enchanted by her beauty, more so all the time. Cleo missed her while she was away.

Cleo settles in Tamara's lap. Tamara is so tall that Cleo's head only reaches up to her neck. Tamara's poised nudity makes Cleo feel frumpy and unattractive, especially now that she notices the rumpled state of her own clothes, slept-in all morning. The feeling evaporates as Tamara squeezes her, digging her nose into Cleo's neck, breathing her in. "I haven't been back long enough to stop missing you, Clee. There were no other women on the expedition." Tamara pulls off Cleo's t-shirt, cups



her sagging breasts. As always, Cleo is fascinated by the chiaroscuro of the soft pink of Tamara's skin against her own dark brown. "They were like little boys, nervous at having their clubhouse invaded by a female, at having their secret handshakes revealed, protective of their toys."

"Tam... Where are the girls?" How could Cleo have thought that Tamara had taken the girls out? Of all of them, Tamara was the least interested in the girls. She let them crawl all over her when they felt like it and was unfalteringly affectionate with them, but she never set aside time for them. She was vaguely uneasy with the idea of children.

"West took them to school. At breakfast, he talked about his lecture, to warm up. His class today is about the symbolic use of animals in politics. One of his case studies is about African elephants. You should have seen Njàbò! She got very excited and asked him tons of questions. She wanted to go hear West at school, and he thought it would be a treat for both of them. Especially seeing as how you seemed to need the sleep."

"I can't believe Sonya would be interested in that..."

Tamara runs her fingers through Cleo's hair and says, "Doesn't Sonya always do what Njàbò wants? Sometimes I think all of us are always doing what Njàbò wants. She'll grow into a leader, that one. She'll trample anyone in her path."

Cleo is momentarily reminded of her dream, but she makes an effort to push it away. She jokes, "Wanna play hooky and go out for lunch? At The Small Easy?"

EIGHT YEARS AGO, CLEO GAVE BIRTH TO NJÀBÒ. MOST PEOPLE THOUGHT THAT the girl looked like Patrice, especially because of her dark skin—like Patrice's, darker than Cleo's—but she could just as easily have been fathered by West or Assaad. The five of them had agreed not to do any tests to find out.

Assaad was Sonya's biological father and her legal guardian. She'd been the daughter of their friends Karin and Pauline. Both women had died in a car accident the day after Njàbò was born. Sonya was three months older than Njàbò.

A few days after the accident, a grey-brown cat jumped through the kitchen window while Patrice was preparing breakfast and drank water from a dirty bowl in the sink. He refused to leave. The family adopted him and called him Waters.

AT THE SMALL EASY, WHILE WAITING FOR THEIR ORDER, TAMARA GOES TO THE washroom. A few seconds after she gets up, a man wearing a denim jacket materializes in her seat. One moment the seat is empty; the next,

the man is there. Cleo is seized with a paralyzing fear. The man is short, almost like a child, but his face is that of an old man. His wrinkled skin is a washed-out greyish brown. He grabs both her hands in his. She feels his fingers, like vises, almost crushing the bones of her hands. "Do not fear your dreams. Do not fear Njàbò. You, too, are one of us, daughter. Believe in Njàbò. Follow her." He vanishes as inexplicably as he appeared. Still numb with fear, all Cleo can focus on is how the old man hadn't spoken in English, but in what she assumes must have been an African language. How had she understood him?

Tamara returns. Cleo says nothing about the old man.

WHEN CLEO AND TAMARA COME BACK FROM LUNCH, THE GIRLS ARE STILL OUT with West. There's a message on the voicemail. He's taking them out downtown; there's a new Brazilian restaurant he's curious about, and then they'll go to the Museum of Civilizations. He says he'll pose in front of the paintings and sculptures and have the girls try to figure out his ancestry. His favorite joke.

When asked about his roots, West never gives the same answer. A mix of Cree and Russian? Hawaiian and Korean? Tibetan and Lebanese? He looks vaguely Asian, but his features don't conform to any specific group. He loves to confuse people, to meddle with their expectations. His odd wit has always charmed Cleo.

Thinking of his easy silliness helps take the edge off her strange encounter at The Small Easy. Cleo takes this opportunity to give herself the day off from mothering and housekeeping.

She goes down to her sanctum. In the basement of their house, she's set up a studio. There's a small window high up on the wall, but she keeps it covered, lets no natural light in. She burns scented candles and incense. She's comfortable painting only in the dim, flickering light, breathing in a rich blend of odors. Full, harsh light makes her feel exposed. The dim candlelight, the smoke, and the smells all contribute to a sense of being enveloped, of being in a cocoon, a womb, in a world where only she and her imagination exist. Sometimes, like today, she smokes a pipeful of hash, not only to relax but also to enrich the room's aroma. Today, she needs to relax.

Had she hallucinated that man in the restaurant? She can still remember the feel of his rough hands against her smooth skin. His smell: like damp soil. How could he know about her secret dream?

She holds the smoke in her lungs as long as she can before blowing it out. She wants the hash to wash out her fears and anxieties. She wants to paint.



The hash is strong. She feels its effects within a few seconds, a soothing combination of numbness, purpose, and timelessness. She loses herself in the canvas.

She emerges from her drugged creative trance. Hours later? Minutes? It is darker: only a handful of candles are still burning.

She goes to the sink and splashes her face with water. She forms a cup with her hands and drinks from it.

She lights a few fresh candles and returns to the canvas. She finds that she has painted a scene from her dream, one of the most violent moments. She had never before let herself depict such brutality. The giant elephant, who, in her dreams, is somehow her daughter Njàbò, is trampling humans beneath her enormous feet. She is throwing a mangled man in the air with her trunk. Cleo notices that she has painted words in the background, including *NJÀBÒ*—but also other strange words that she has never heard of before, such as *MÒKILÀ* and *MOKIDWA*.

“Why are you afraid of the dream?”

Cleo is startled by this intrusion.

Njàbò?

Cleo turns, but her daughter doesn’t wait to hear the answer. Cleo hears her rush up the stairs and shut the door. Does she know that Cleo has no answer? Cleo isn’t surprised that Njàbò knows about her recurring dream. She’s scared, and what scares her most, somehow, is that lack of surprise.

IT WAS PATRICE WHO HAD KNOWN WHAT “NJÀBÒ” MEANT, BUT CLEO WHO NAMED the baby. How had it come to her?

After the midwife had left, the whole family had slipped into bed with Cleo and the new baby. Cleo had immediately fallen asleep, exhausted from the long labor. She had slept deeply, had not remembered any dreams, but had woken knowing the baby’s name. “I think I want to call her Njàbò,” it was an odd-sounding word that meant nothing to her, “but I don’t know why.”

Patrice, who had been devastated by the elephant tragedy and had read many books to assuage his grief, recognized it. The last elephant, a female African forest elephant on a reserve in the Congo, had died nearly a year before Njàbò’s birth. Poaching, loss of habitat due to increasing human encroachment, spiteful slaughters in backlash against conservationists, and disease had finally taken their toll. All efforts at cloning had failed and were still failing.

“I know!” Patrice had said. “Njàbò... Njàbò is a mythical creature from Africa: the mother of all elephants. A giant with enormous tusks

who appears whenever the elephants need a strong leader. All elephants gather around her when she calls. It's a beautiful name. A strong name for our strong girl. I like it." Everyone had agreed. Cleo had pushed aside the question of how the name had come to her. It was one of those unsolvable riddles best left alone.

Now, looking at the name on the canvas, she is more convinced than ever that she had never heard or seen the name before it mysteriously came to her eight years ago.

THE DREAM NOW PLAGUES CLEO NIGHTLY. SHE IS ALWAYS TIRED, NEVER GETTING enough sleep, never fully rested.

She avoids Njābò. She has begged off mothering. Tamara, Patrice, West, and Assaad now share the task. Cleo, after all, has taken on the bulk of that work for the past eight years, devoted her time and life to raising Njābò and Sonya, to taking care of the house while the four of them pursued their careers. There had been that book with Tamara, five years ago, when the girls were three years old. The paintings, the shows, the tours. Of course, they say to Cleo, she should explore that aspect of her life again, let someone else take care of the house, the girls.

Tonight, the house is quiet. The whole family has gone for a walk in the park. It rained all day, and finally the cloud cover broke to give way to a warm evening. Cleo had agreed to go, but begged off at the last minute. Assaad, especially, insisted that she come along, to spend time with the family. But in the end she'd stayed alone in the house. Well, not quite alone.

Waters follows her as she walks into the living room. She takes down a big art book from a shelf built into the wall. Cleo sits on the floor; Waters sits in front of her, purring and rubbing his head on her knee. She opens the book at random and remembers.

THE BOOK, *THE ABSENCE OF ELEPHANTS*, WAS A WORLDWIDE SUCCESS. TRYING TO exorcize her dream, which she never talked about, Cleo had created a series of elephant paintings. Some were scenes from her dreams, but not all. She had used no photographic references. The results ranged from photorealism to evocative abstractions. She painted in the evenings when the girls were asleep in bed. The whole family was extremely excited about her paintings. Patrice and Njābò, especially, spent hours looking at them, but it was Tamara who had been inspired by them.

Tamara had sold her publisher on the idea: an art book combining Cleo's paintings with photos of forests and plains where elephants used to thrive, of human constructions that now stood in areas that were once



habitats for elephants. There would be no words: the pictures, especially in the wake of the global desolation over the extinction of the elephants, would speak in all languages, allowing the book to be marketed worldwide without the cost of translation. Tamara would go to Africa, India, and anywhere else where any elephants—even woolly mammoths—had once lived, hunting with her camera the ghosts of the dead creatures.

*The Absence of Elephants* led to gallery bookings. Cleo's paintings, along with Tamara's photographs, were hung in cities all over the world, from Buenos Aires and Montreal to Glasgow and Sydney... but not in India, where the book was too hot politically. The two women had gone on tour with their work—wine, food, and five-star hotels all expensed. It had been a glamorous, exciting experience for Cleo—and it had forged a complicit bond between the two women. Before then, Cleo had often been intimidated by the beautiful Tamara's fashionable elegance.

The book, the sales of paintings and signed, numbered prints of Tamara's photos, the DVD-ROM, the web rights, and the CGI Imax film had made the family not quite wealthy, but certainly at ease.

West took a sabbatical from the university and looked after the house and the children. After nearly a year of book tours, art galleries, and media appearances, Cleo missed Njābò and Sonya, yearned to return to domestic life. She came back home, to the girls. For the next few years, she rarely painted. But the dream continued to haunt her.

CLEO NOW SPENDS ENTIRE DAYS IN HER STUDIO, HAS EVEN TAKEN TO LOCKING herself in. Sometimes she stands silently behind the door, listening to the others talk about her. They assume that she has been overtaken by a new creative storm, is painting a new series, and needs time alone to focus her creative energies.

In truth, Cleo's days disappear in a cloud of hash. She hides from her fears: of Njābò, of what she would paint if she were to take up the brush, of being in public, vulnerable to the appearance of the wrinkled old man.

THE FIRST THING CLEO THINKS IS: PATRICE AND ASSAAD LOOK SO UNCOMFORTABLE sleeping on that small ugly couch. Patrice is lying on top of Assaad, resting his head on Assaad's shoulder. Assaad's arms are wrapped around Patrice, one hand on the small of his back, the other on his shoulder blade. "Patty? Assaad?" The two men snap awake. And then Cleo peers around the room, touching the mattress beneath her. She thinks: Is this a hospital bed?

Cleo notices that Patrice looks worried, but she can't read Assaad,

whose face is even more inscrutable than usual. Getting up, the men stand on either side of Cleo, each wrapping one of her hands in their own. Cleo takes her hands back before they can say anything. "Enough. This is too much. Go sit down. What am I doing here?"

They go back to the couch. Assaad squeezes Patrice's hand, nodding at him to speak. "No, love, you tell her," Patrice says. "You found her."

Assaad looks straight into Cleo's eyes, willing her to keep her eyes locked on his. His voice is dry ice, fuming with wisps of cold mist. "None of us had seen you for more than a day. For weeks, you've been distant, aloof, oblivious to the girls, oblivious to all of us."

Cleo's muscles tighten up, in a reflex effort to protect herself. She's never heard Assaad speak in such a cold, hard voice before.

"We thought you were working on a new series. You let us believe that."

Assaad pauses, his eyes still locked on Cleo's. Is he waiting for an explanation? Or a reaction? Cleo wants to look away, but can't.

"As I said, we hadn't seen you for more than a day. You hadn't come to bed the night before. You'd locked yourself in your studio. The girls and I were ready to have lunch. I knocked on your door, calling you, inviting you to eat with us. You didn't answer. I knocked harder. Yelled out your name. Still, you didn't answer. I had to take the door out. I found you unconscious. The air was foul. You'd pissed yourself. Vomited."

Again, a pause. Cleo feels the cold mist of Assaad's anger go down her throat, into her stomach. Cleo has never seen Assaad like this. Of all of them, he is the most patient, the most understanding, the one who resolves conflicts, soothes hurts and pains. How could she have let it come to this?

"There was but one new painting. Later, Njàbò told us you'd painted that one weeks ago, the day West brought them to his class. I called the ambulance. I couldn't rouse you."

Another pause. Patrice fills the tense silence. "The doctor told us you were suffering from dehydration and malnutrition. Why haven't you been eating? What have you been doing? Are you angry with us? Speak to us, Clee, we all love you. Maybe we should have been more attentive. You were looking weak, tired. We should have paid attention. We were all too preoccupied, with work and with the girls. Why are you hiding from us? What are you hiding from us?" Patrice's voice gets louder and increasingly reproachful. "Why did you let this happen?"

Assaad looks away from Cleo, puts his hand on Patrice's shoulder, calms him, and, in the process, calms himself. Patrice frowns, "I'm sorry, Clee, I— I'm just worried about you."



“Patty, I...” She avoids their faces. She feels ashamed. Why has she kept the dream a secret all these years? The dream is a chasm into which intimacy is falling ever further from her grasp. Can it reemerge from those depths after so many years of secrecy? “How... How are the girls?”

“They’re fine, Clee. Assaad quit his job at The Smoke Shop. He’s a great mother.” Patrice’s grin fills his whole face. He ruffles Assaad’s hair, kissing him on the cheek. Assaad fights a losing battle against the grin spreading on his face. “We didn’t really need the money. It’s a stimulating change to be at home with the girls. It’s a challenge to teach them, and to learn from them.”

“Who’s taking ca—”

Assaad answers, “They’re with West today. He took them to see the new Katgirl & Canary movie that they’ve both been so excited about.”

“How long have I been here?”

Patrice glances at Assaad, then gets up and sits next to her on the bed, stroking her face. “You’ve been out for four days. It’s Sunday.”

Cleo closes her eyes. She wishes she knew why she’s been so apprehensive, why she’s been hiding a part of herself from her lovers. She remembers falling in love with Patrice when she was still waiting on tables at The Small Easy. She remembers him introducing her to his family—Assaad, Tamara, West; her family, now. She takes a blind leap. “I’ve been having this dream...”

THE BAKA—THE FEW HUNDRED WHO REMAIN—LIVE IN THE FOREST, IN A TERRITORY that covers part of Cameroon and the Congo. They believe—or believed, Cleo isn’t sure—that the Mòkilà were a tribe of shapeshifters, both elephant and human. The Mòkilà would raid Baka villages and initiate the captives into their secret society. Their sorcerers, the mokidwa, would transform their captives into shapeshifters. The captives became Mòkilà and were never again seen by their families.

The mokidwa could take on the form of any animal. They also knew the secret of invisibility.

Njàbò is the ancestor of all elephants, sometimes male, sometimes female. Stories abound of avatars of Njàbò, giant cows or bulls, leading herds of elephants against Baka warriors or villages. Njàbò’s tusks are so enormous, they contain ten other tusks within them. Njàbò is often flanked by a retinue of guards.

Cleo has been trying to demystify her experiences. She searched the web for those strange words on her painting and found them. She asked West to get books from the university library. She’s been reading on the Baka and the myth of Njàbò. She’s never cared before about her ancestry

and now finds herself wondering if perhaps there are Baka or Mòkilà among her ancestors. The Mòkilà are a myth, she reminds herself.

She's been painting again. The new canvases are violent, raw. When she painted her first series years ago, she hadn't felt this uninhibited. Now, every session leaves her exhausted, yet exhilarated. Having shared her dream with her family, she has nothing to hide. She feels free.

She is still dreaming every night, but the dream is changing. Now the whole family walks with Njàbò. And the dream is getting longer. There is more violence, more bloodshed. Njàbò leads the tribe around the world. They crush all human constructions. They kill all the humans. Theirs is an unstoppable stampede. Cleo has painted much of this. Now, the dream continues beyond the violence. The tribe walks the Earth in peace. The tribe grows and Njàbò reigns. Today, for the first time, Cleo's painting is inspired by that part of the dream.

The others tell her that they, too, have started dreaming of Njàbò, the elephant.

She leaves her door open; sometimes the others come down and watch her work, quietly, discreetly. At first, she knew, they were keeping an eye on her, worried that she would withdraw once again. After a few weeks, that changed. Now they come down because they find it exciting to be in the room while Cleo is painting. The candlelight, the thick odors, and her absolute devotion to the canvas all combine to create a mesmerizing ambience. Even Waters has been spending hours curled up under her stool.

Every day, Njàbò comes, silently, to see her paint. Cleo is still nervous around her daughter, still avoids talking with her. Cleo can feel that Njàbò is in the room now. The painting is finished. It depicts Njàbò, the elephant, towering over her herd, young elephants running around her, playing, celebrating. Around the elephants, the forest is lush.

Njàbò, the eight-year-old girl, walks up to her mother in silence. She gazes at the painting. Cleo sees the tears running down her daughter's cheeks. Cleo gathers Njàbò in her lap. The girl buries her head in her mother's breasts. They both cry. Cleo can't remember crying with such abandon, feeling so cleansed by the act. She hugs her daughter, firmly, proudly.

I AM AWAKENED BY A LIGHT KISS ON THE MOUTH. NJÀBÒ HAS CRAWLED INTO bed, is holding my hand. Sonya is behind her, quiet, submissive. Njàbò whispers, "I am the dream."

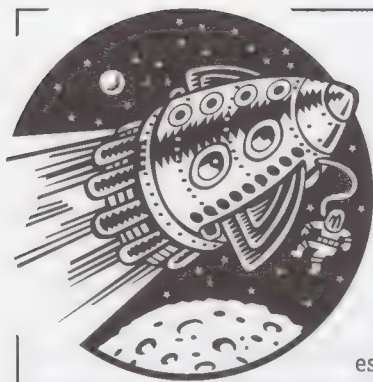
Njàbò rouses the entire family, kissing them one by one: Patrice, West, Assaad, and, finally, Tamara. She whispers lovingly to each of them, her

lips brushing their ears.

She leads the family outside. The street is deserted in the middle of the night. Njàbò turns to face us all together. We are all naked.

Looking straight into my eyes, Waters rubs himself against Njàbò's leg. Behind my daughter, a group of old men materializes. The mokidwa have shed their invisibility.

Njàbò smiles. Soon, the ground will tremble. ♣



## Science Fiction Deposit Research Collection at the University of Alberta Library

The University of Alberta Library is soliciting donations to its recently established Science Fiction Deposit

Research Collection to create a still larger, publicly accessible, research collection of regional and national significance, similar to that of Toronto's Merril Collection of Science Fiction, Speculation and Fantasy.

Science fiction and fantasy novels, journals, pulp magazines, archives, and ephemera, as well as UFOlogy are being sought. Donations are eligible for tax receipts for their appraised value.

For further information about the collection and donation procedures contact:

Merrill Distad  
at (780) 492-1429  
(merrill.distad@ualberta.ca)

OR Randy Reichardt  
at (780) 492-7911  
(randy.reichardt@ualberta.ca).



*He finished ten Snickers bars, half a bag of carrots, and a package of cupcakes. He was still hungry. He made a private, impetuous resolve. Somehow, some way, he would have meat tonight...*

# Meat

Craig Strickland

*GLORIOUS WET REDNESS, SCULPTED INTO PERFECT PORTIONS. SOME with neatly-severed bone, the clean white in pleasing contrast to the rest of the piece. Choice parts of leg and torso and even brain, all attractively cut and arranged, with tiny sprigs of fresh parsley for color.*

Which of you works of art should I take home for supper? thought Sam as he windexed. He knelt before the display case like a priest before his altar, balancing his 270 pounds with one hand on the floorboards. A pair of half-inch pork chops, perhaps? Or maybe a fat T-bone, to pan-fry in butter and garlic? He couldn't decide.

*A butcher in his own meat market, Sam reflected for the hundredth time, was like a kid in a candy store.*

Sam had closed, as always, at eight. The lights were dimmed, the cash register full. The only sounds the rhythmic squeak from his rag and the steady throbbing hum of the refrigerator units. Squeak, hum. Squeak, hum, over and over.

At nine o'clock, a tapping sound joined the little arrangement.

Squeak, hum, *tap*.

It came from the back.

Sam's rag froze in mid-stroke. The new sound rudely popped the bubble of dinner dreams, replacing them with that most dreaded word in a businessman's vocabulary: *burglars*. He looked wide-eyed to the cutting room doors. A faded sign hung over them: "Man Cannot Live By Bread Alone." Sam had hand-lettered that sign 25 years ago, the week he'd first opened.

The sound came again. *Tap*. Just a little noise—a mouse, maybe. Or a man, trying to be quiet.

Sam pulled at his graying mustache and crept behind the sales counter, hunching over as far as his bloated waistline would allow. He plucked a large and shiny cleaver from a drawer, then inched the swinging door slowly open into the cool air of the cutting room.

Nothing seemed amiss. The surfaces were clean and scoured. The knife-handles protruded like black cat tails from the knife-block. The electric bandsaw and needle machine sat perfectly idle. But there *had* been an intruder. The gate to the alley was ajar, a sliver of night showing through the entrance. And the door to the walk-in refrigerator was wide open.

Sam peeked in the cooler, his jaw slackening. The white shelves were completely vacant; the huge hooks gleamed empty steel. There wasn't a piece of meat left in the room. The cry-vac—the tight plastic with which the packing houses always wrapped the meat—lay on the floor, shredded, like so much confetti.

Sam burst through the door, waving the cleaver in wild arcs, and ran out into the parking lot. Outside, a chorus of police sirens wailed and shrieked, sounding like the coyotes he sometimes heard at night, wailing out their gibbering, insane laughs in the Texas desert. His old Honda, parked by the shop, was the only car in the lot.

A thin line of blood and juice gleamed purple in the streetlight. It trailed out of the alley and to the store-front side of the building, disappearing under a long hedge of hibiscus bordering the sidewalk on one side and the street on the other.

*Could something have crept in and dragged the meat into the bushes?* He raised his cleaver and ran along the hedge, white plastic apron fluttering. Something rustled. He peered under the rim of bushes, but could see only a leafy blackness.

What could fit under there? A cat? A large rodent?

Relief washed over him as he spotted an old Volkswagen with crumpled bumpers parked in front of the Sunset Tavern. At the wheel, a head

of long matted hair nodded and bobbed. It was Herb. Not very good company, most times, but better than no company at a time like this.

Sam ran up to the car and put his face into the bourbon fumes coming from the open window. "Herb!" he said. "I've been robbed! Did you see anyone come by here, maybe with a refrigerator truck?"

Herb's rheumy eyes turned on Sam and slowly focused. "Ain't no one gone by in the lash half-hour. 'cept for the 'lucinations."

"'Hallucinations?'" Sam frowned. "What hallucinations are you talking about?"

The drunk grabbed the steering wheel. "I 'lucinated the street was filled with roadkill!" he slurred, his voice hitching. "Looked like ... like pieces of hamburger crawlin' across the pavement!" He hid his face in his hands.

"It would be wise if you didn't drive for a while," Sam said. He keyed into an announcer's deep voice from Herb's dashboard radio: "...reported so far by Food King Market in Holbrook, Vic's Market and Brown's Deli in Joseph City, and by several local fast-food restaurants. So far authorities are dumbfounded by this area-wide rash of meat theft..."

A strange intuition struck Sam. He bolted back to the shop.

The cutting room remained empty and meatless. However, dim fluorescent bulbs illumined a blur of motion in the display case. A twitching and straining was reflected in the glint from hundreds of plastic wrappers.

Dizzy, Sam held onto a counter top with both hands. All he could do was stare.

A foursome of thin-cut pork chops was the first to break through its shrinkwrap prison. Each chop trembled as if frenzied, flipping from side to side, then hitting the floor with a little slap. These were followed by a small pack of chicken wings which, being unable to fly, simply opened and closed while balanced on their tips, advancing like so many pairs of pink scissors. Next were ribs, fish, steaks and soup bones. Each found and used its own peculiar method of locomotion. At the small sliding display case door, a large rib steak wedged its bone into the area at the latch until the door slid open several inches. Then, one by one, the rest of the meat came to the edge, fell, and proceeded single-file toward checkout.

The sweetbreads, hamburger meat and filets were the last to leave. Having nothing sharp to cut through the binding plastic, they resorted to heaving their formless masses madly about and bouncing to the floor, styrofoam trays and all.

After several minutes Sam came to his senses. He scurried over the parade of animal parts and locked the door.



But it was no good. The procession led from the case, down the aisle, and to the store window. There the rib steak pecked a hole in the glass, and the wriggling, squirming line headed through the frame and into the lot.

THE NEXT MORNING, THE PAPERS SCREAMED WITH ARTICLES OF THE AWFUL phenomenon. “*Moving Meat: World-wide Affliction*” headlined the main story. It offered lurid descriptions of steaks pushing refrigerators open, hamburgers leaping from sizzling grills, pork chops wriggling off breadboards in the midst of being stuffed, and all of it creeping away, God knew where. Scientists, terming the event “spontaneous reanimation,” noted that fresh cases occurred following any slaughter. Things dying in the wild or of natural causes seemed exempt. But if any animal or fish was killed for meat, its flesh quite literally *crawled*.

Adjoining articles offered interviews with various experts suggesting explanations: “*Moving Meat Caused By Widespread Worm Infestations?*” ran one headline. “*Effects Of Passing Meteor’s Magnetism?*” went another. Sam was sure they would figure it out by tomorrow’s edition. If he had to choose, he leaned toward the meteor theory. He knew damn well that his meat was all U.S.D.A. Choice, and that he’d never sold a wormy cut in his life.

After a time Sam put the paper down and stared outside, idly twisting his mustache. He lived above his shop, and his window displayed the street below with its rows of hibiscus.

*His entire livelihood had crawled under those same bushes.*

His customers had always appreciated his expertise with the sharp blade. They’d take out their money and gawk at the red wedges behind the glass, buzzing like flies at a summer picnic. “Top sirloin! Give me two and a half pounds of that top sirloin, Sam!” they’d say. Or: “We’re having a little party tonight, Sam. Could you pick out eight of your best chicken filets?”

It had been the sweetest music. But now—NOW! How would he be important to people? Meat was his life. The entire thing was a sour dream, and much too important, he suddenly decided, to mull over on an empty stomach.

He strolled into the kitchen—but a shocking sight sent him running the last few steps. The refrigerator door—*his* refrigerator door—stood open. Sam felt the packages of American cheese, the beer, the gallon container of mayo—all lukewarm. He sniffed at a carton of milk and cast it aside in disgust. A premium cut of roast beef, some leg of lamb and the breakfast meats were gone, and after a second he saw what had

happened—they'd pushed open the fridge door and exited the house through the cat window. He found the bacon wrapper snagged on a rose bush in the garden.

Sam stared at the empty, greasy wrapper, feeling that it was a gauntlet tossed at his feet. He returned to his room, grabbed his old plaid suitcase from the closet and flung it on his bed. Inside he angrily tossed underwear, socks, ties and trousers.

Now it was personal. Mad, displaced and hungry, the butcher had decided to go after his meat.

HE SAT ON THE TINY SEAT OF HIS HONDA SEDAN AND SHIFTED DOWN INTERSTATE 40. The morning was hot, and the clouds glowed with a pink hue. Sage and sandstone stretched to the edge of the sky. It seemed the beginning of a typical West Texas day, everything utterly normal—except, of course, for the police helicopters on the horizon. And the river. *That wasn't normal at all.*

It was off to the right of the highway, maybe 500 yards from the asphalt. No water was visible, only red clay banks, long and meandering. The problem was that there was no river there—never had been, that Sam could recall. This ate at him until he pulled over and got out. He squinted into the distance, shading his eyes with a plump, sweaty hand.

The riverbank was moving. Looking closer, he realized he'd been mistaken. What he had taken for clay was really thousands of pieces of meat, oozing and crawling along the mesa. Like a herd of red slugs, naked and wet in the morning light.

"Well, damn," Sam said aloud, spitting into the parched ground. "Looks like they're headed toward Albuquerque."

He drove off in hot pursuit.

After some time he noticed other rivers. Little tributaries ran along both sides of the road, like pulsing veins laid across the desert. All of them flowed west, so Sam flowed west with them. He had no plans—only questions. That night he pulled into the small town of Santa Rosa, New Mexico, ravenous.

The first two restaurants were closed. He strolled in the open front door of a coffee shop and settled himself into a booth. The place was all but deserted. A tall waitress with corn-colored hair walked over, empty-handed.

"No menu?" Sam asked.

"No need. Not since ... everything changed." Her voice was small and timid.

"I guess a burger is out of the question?"

"No burgers. No steak. No chicken," she said, eyes flitting about the empty room. "Lord, Mister. Those're the main things people *want*. I'm gonna have no job, if this keeps up." Her lower lip trembled, ever so slightly.

Sam ordered a large salad, a grilled cheese sandwich, and a slab of apple pie, and she hurried off, happy to be doing something.

Later he stood shirtless in a hotel bathroom, still hungry. Hungry for meat. It had been a day and a half since he'd had any. "I wasn't cut out to be a vegetarian," he told himself sadly, studying his shoulder-wide love handles in the mirror.

He finally fell to sleep and dreamed he was running on a wide mesa, chasing a huge something in the dust just ahead. His life depended on catching it. The dust cloud parted, and he saw them: thousands of cows, pigs and lambs, hooves pulverizing the soil. If he didn't catch them he felt he would die here of starvation, his skin drying to leather under the sagebrush.

Suddenly, the animals changed direction. They stampeded directly for him, steam pumping from snouts, eyes glazed, and he ran helplessly toward them...

They were inches away when he awoke with a start. Something tasteless and dry filled Sam's mouth. It took a moment to realize he'd been chewing on his pillow.

BY THE TIME HE FOUND A PLACE SERVING BREAKFAST, SOME OF THE RIVERS HAD dried up. On their way, most pieces had wriggled free of their bones, shedding them like snake-skin along paths, under turnpikes, on grassy hillsides—leaving thousands of trails, bordered in white fragments, to crisscross the country.

He sat drinking coffee and thumbing a newspaper. A heaping bowl of cereal yawned before him, untouched, the milk slowly dissolving the flakes into mush. I'm dying for sausage, he thought. Just four links rolled into a pancake. That's all I ask.

One headline read: "*Moving Meat Caused By Unreported Nuclear Accidents?*" Another article theorized that the earth had shifted on its axis, causing the emanation of a bizarrely selective gravity pull.

One article struck Sam as particularly sad. "*Slaughter & Packing Houses Close Doors*," it announced. The sub-head read, "*'After butchering, it runs from our axes,' says worker.*" Another story told of growing numbers of livestock being turned loose. A photo pictured a cow grazing lazily on a city sidewalk, human passersby giving the creature a wide berth.

"Disgusting," said Sam aloud. "Next thing you know people'll be wor-



shipping them." He left his newspaper by the bowl of soggy wheatflakes and hurried to his car.

He caught up with the red rivers just past the California border. That was when he noticed the birds. High overhead, the sky was a slow black wheel: a huge, mixed flock endlessly circling.

He stopped in a supermarket parking lot in Blythe and watched as a golden hawk glided to earth about a half-mile away. It pounced on something in one of the pink lines, and flew off with a morsel in its talons.

Easy picking, thought Sam. Whatever's wrong with it, it's not hurting the birds.

In the market, he saw a hopeful headline. "*Some Hot Dogs Are Okay*," it said. For some unknown reason—maybe having to do with the fillers—some brands of frankfurters were not moving. It was apparently the only unaffected meat. Sam tried to remember if he had any weenies in the freezer at home.

He left the supermarket with a bulging sack. With his Honda on cruise control, he finished ten Snickers bars, half a bag of carrots and a package of cupcakes. He was still hungry. He made a private, impetuous resolve. Somehow, some way, he would have meat tonight.

A little later, the radio interrupted its country medley for a news announcement: "Scientists are carefully tracking the destination of the world's raw meat, which has been inexplicably crawling free since Thursday. Observers in Europe, China and the coastal U.S. have noted that it appears to be heading for the nearest oceans."

"Won't be long now," said Sam aloud. Then, for minutes later, he wondered why had had said it, and what he expected to happen.

BY LATE AFTERNOON HE SAT ON A BOULDER IN SAN CLEMENTE. NOT A HUNDRED FEET ahead crashed the Pacific. Counterpointing the rhythm of the waves was a rushing sound coming from a great, wide line of meat. The line wound snake-like among the boulders and sand and flowed into the sea.

People crowded the beach, milling, talking and pointing. The sky above was dense with birds and helicopters. Sam watched the pieces of meat, marching into the whitewater like so many lemmings, and tuned in to the conversation around him.

"I don't think we should get much closer, Harold," said a thin woman, clutching her husband's arm. "It's probably radioactive!"

"Naw," replied a short man with a scowling face. "It's just some kind of publicity gimmick, for a new movie or something..."

"Bull!" said another. "The gays are behind this!"

"I don't think we should get much closer, Harold!"

One man sat in the sand with a bottle of champagne, studying the passing legs. "It's the end of the world, ya know," he said, to no one in particular.

A warm breeze carried the smell of the meat through the crowd. A whole side of ribs passed by, convulsively flexing its way forward. Its bones had fallen out long before. A mass of ground round closely followed, oozing along at a surprisingly fast clip. Sam realized he was salivating. A lamb shank, a porterhouse, and a pair of beef tongues. A quartered salmon, the sections rolling one after another through the sand.

Finally, Sam saw one he could not resist. A mid-sized pork roast had appeared, wriggling along like a fat worm. He bent down and grabbed it.

It was wet and warm, and it writhed as he clutched it, running back through the beach. It's still fresh, he reflected. And a center-cut, too. He *was* lucky. Juice streamed from the roast, marking his wrists with sticky rivulets.

Back in his kitchenette at the Travel Inn, Sam rinsed sand off the pork. He patted it dry with paper towels. The meat struggled forcefully under his fingers. He was reminded, with a mixture of wonder and distaste, of drying a baby after a bath. Sam tried rubbing the meat with garlic, but found that the flesh rippled as he stroked it, flicking the tiny pieces of bulb from his fingers. Finally he tied it with several lengths of twine to a shallow roasting pan and put it in the oven at 325°.

He sat in a chair before the glass window, and soon became as engrossed as if he were watching a good T.V. game show. For the first ten minutes the trembling meat rocked the pan gently on the rack, causing an odd little ringing. It sounded to Sam like a dinner bell. His stomach groaned. It *is* possible. Please, God, let it be possible that I can have a normal dinner again, he thought, pulling painfully on his mustache.

The meat was still for several minutes. All at once, it heaved in a violent spasm. The pan skidded to the side of the oven. The roast lunged toward the side, the twine snapped, and the meat rolled madly over the racks. It thrashed from side to side, top to bottom, sizzling against hot metal. Nausea struck Sam. This meal was going to take much longer than usual. He hurried from the room for a long walk.

Sam made his way onto the pier into the face of a beautiful orange sunset. He stopped at the railing, joining the other gawkers. On shore, people clustered, not talking or moving. The rivers had diminished now. Only thin single lines flowed in makeshift beds which had held four and five pieces abreast. The ocean, meanwhile, boiled pink as sharks and other fish feasted.

An elderly man strolled past, binoculars bouncing off his chest. The old

fellow shot Sam a sidelong glance. "Well, can ya blame it?" he said in a pinched back hills accent. "It just don't wanna get *et* any more, that's all!"

Sam couldn't even bring himself to respond.

In the kitchenette, over five hours later, Sam wrinkled his nose at the thick stench of burnt meat. He opened the oven door cautiously. The inside was caked with grime. The roast, a shriveled stub blackened beyond recognition, lay unmoving under the bottom rack.

Sam brought it to the table, heart pounding—as much from the trauma of the cooking as from the anticipation of finally tasting meat. With shaking hands, he opened a jar of applesauce and dabbed a big spoonful on his plate. Then he began cutting. He sliced through the crust of several black, inedible layers. The very center was a dark gray, still mildly moist. He sliced a bite and, dipping it ceremoniously into the applesauce, put it into his mouth.

The charcoal taste predominated, but the underlying flavor was deliciously reminiscent of past meals. Eyes shut, he envisioned honey-baked hams, London broil...veal cordon bleu! He gently closed his teeth around it—but felt a sudden pulsing against his tongue. His eyes popped open. It was still alive—alive inside his mouth! He chewed once more, but a vision filled his head.

*A bloody scene from a nature special: lions devouring a dying zebra.*

Sam loved his meat, but not enough to turn into an animal. He spit it out in disgust.

The half-chewed piece simply lay on the kitchen tiles like a spent wad of gum. Then its surface slowly curled, and it flopped over, squirming weakly, and moved inch by inch across the floor in the direction of the sea. Sam held the door open for it, then ran into the bathroom to throw up.

SIX MONTHS LATER, SAM STOOD BEHIND THE COUNTER AT HIS STORE ONCE AGAIN. He had lost over seventy-five pounds, and was still amazed at how lightly he moved on his feet. The cash register before him was full, and the customers crowded in like cattle, each one shouting an order. All at once he was overcome with nostalgia, and the feeling almost seduced him into believing that the past had, indeed, become the present. Then he realized anew what they were ordering.

Soybean burger meat. Seaweed steak. Vegetable-protein sausage. Items which, in earlier days, he couldn't have imagined selling. Not even as a joke.

Walking upstairs later that evening, Sam reflected that it could have turned out a hell of a lot worse. He might have worked for a steak-knife manufacturer, or a fast-food chain, or a toothpick company, or any one



of the numerous other industries which had folded in the dawn of a suddenly-meatless world. The entire economy had almost gone under, stock-market prices hitting record lows, two of the major T.V. networks stunned into bankruptcy with the loss of advertising revenue.

Owners of once-thriving slaughterhouses periodically tested meat, hoping for a reversal of the horrible phenomenon, but the pieces always crawled off immediately after butchering, eventually plunging themselves into the ocean depths.

People nowadays fell into one of two camps: scientists had come to believe aliens with strange powers orchestrated the entire thing; moralists thought it was God's way of shaking up the world.

Sam didn't buy either theory. All he knew was that it happened, and he had found a way to live through it. He still had his shop. He also had—his hot dogs.

And tonight—he *got to eat one*.

The mere thought made him light-headed.

Oh, the elation he felt when he'd returned to his Texas home and discovered an unopened eight-pack of beef weenies in his freezer! He'd had one that very night, and, true to the news reports, it hadn't moved. Eating it was an orgasmic experience. Then he had learned of the preciousness of his cache: a newspaper article told of full, frozen packs of frankfurters being auctioned off at up to \$50,000 apiece. The sub-headline read, "*Hot Dogs—New Delicacy Of The Rich.*"

He'd promised himself more if he managed to survive for six months. Tonight was the big night; he'd had a weenie carefully thawing in the refrigerator all day, and as soon as he entered the kitchen he put his opener to a magnificent bottle of cabernet sauvignon he'd been saving to accompany the feast.

Pop! went the cork.

*Tap, tap*, went something from inside his refrigerator.

Sam turned, corkscrew in hand, staring at the huge lock on the cooler door. The tapping came again. His eyes filled with tears.

Aloud, he prayed, "Please, God, don't let it be the weenie!"

His fingers trembled as he unlocked the refrigerator. He stood before the open door, knees weak, his mouth agape.

The frankfurter was fine. But his broccoli was twitching, edging itself gently off the shelf, and in the crisper the lettuce leaves were fluttering like the wings of a summer butterfly. ♣

*"Some babies are found in cabbage patches, others on doorstops. I was discovered in the roll-top of an oak secretary abandoned on the streets of Galveston..."*

# The Oak Secretary

Melissa Hardy

"HELLO, MR. WENGER?" THE VOICE AT THE END OF THE LINE rasped. "My name is Liz Brown. I'm an antiques buyer in Galveston."

Jack winced as he lowered his untidy, middle-aged self into the swivel chair in front of the big oak desk. He was a shambles of a man with hair like Mo, two days worth of stubble glittering on his jowls, and clad, for the second day running, in his current favorite outfit: a rumpled Hawaiian shirt, wrinkled khaki boxers and yellow flip-flops. The night before he had put away more bourbon, cigarettes and Pecos Pete chicken wings than he had believed possible even for a man of his intestinal fortitude, which, he had to admit, must have declined since the last time he mounted such an attack upon his internal organs of digestion: his throat sizzled like the Dallas speedway on the fourth of July, he had a headache the size of Lubbock and, further south, ominous rumbles portended seismic activity of the molten lava variety.

However, Ruth Wenger, God rest her soul, had raised her boy to be polite even under such self-induced duress as this. "Yes'm?" he managed to croak into the telephone receiver. "What can I do for you, Miz Brown?"

"Back in the late 1900s there was a furniture factory in Galveston," the antiques buyer informed him. "Needham and Co. They specialized

in oak desks and office furniture. Custom orders mostly. Contract work for post offices... that sort of thing. They did interesting stuff... some unusual features that make their furniture distinctive."

"Um-hum," Jack encouraged her, massaging his throbbing temples and wondering why he had even come into the office today. The mid-week edition of his newspaper, the *Altamount Dispatch*, circulation 724, had already gone to press and it wasn't as if he had a work ethic.

"The flood of 1900 destroyed the factory," Liz told him. "Washed it clean away. It was never rebuilt. However, I have managed to trace one of their desks to you."

"Hold on," Jack said. "Are you talking about Grandma's secretary? Roll-top, pigeonholes, bookshelves on top, glass front?"

"That's the one," Liz replied.

"Well, sure!" exclaimed Jack. "It's in my living room. Has been since we sold the farm."

"I have good news for you, Mr. Wenger," Liz told him. "One of my clients collects Needhams and he's very anxious to purchase the secretary from you."

Jack frowned. His mother had been very particular about the secretary—always dusting it and polishing it with lemon oil. His grandmother too. "I don't know about that, Miz Brown," he said. "It's been in my family a long time."

"Five thousand dollars, Mr. Wenger," Liz offered.

Jack whistled. "That's a lot of money," he admitted.

"The secretary would fetch \$2,500 at least in the antiques market, depending on its condition, of course, but my client is willing to pay twice that."

"Five thousand dollars!" Jack repeated. He could buy himself a new used pickup! No sooner had he visualized himself behind the wheel, however, than an image of his deceased mother elbowed her way into his automotive fantasy, wagging her finger and declaring, "That secretary is an heirloom, Jack Wenger! Don't you even think about selling it to some stranger!"

"I'll have to ponder it," Jack told the woman. "Can I call you back in a couple of days?"

"Of course," replied Liz. "Don't wait too long, though." She gave him her cell number and her pager ID.

That night, while he was lying in bed reflecting upon how astonishing it was that a hangover could last so long and how that Alka-Seltzer he had just gulped down didn't seem to be helping much, Jack was abducted by aliens.



"WHAT CAN WE DO TO MAKE YOU STOP SCREAMING?" THE CREATURE ASKED JACK.

Her voice did not sound as if it were produced in her throat but from somewhere deeper inside of her elongated, pale body. It curled out of her, like a slow cat unwinding. "You're frightening the others," she added, indicating with a wave of her three-fingered hand the row of examining tables in the round chamber just beyond the portal; on each table lay a naked, inert body. The setup reminded Jack of a morgue. A newspaperman for going on to three decades, he'd seen his share of morgues, but never one so big as this or with so many bodies. Where had they all come from?

"Well, for starters," he advised her, "your boys can stop sticking things up my ass!"

"That's all over, Jack," she assured him.

"God, but I need a cigarette!" Jack realized, patting his pockets only to remember that he had no pockets, being naked.

"Here you go, Jack," the creature said, taking a pack of Luckies and a Zippo lighter from a pocket of her tan overalls. "Not your brand, I'm afraid."

"Beggars can't be choosers," Jack observed, extracting a cigarette from the pack and lighting it. He inhaled gratefully—what a feeling that was, your lungs lighting up inside like a Christmas tree, all washed in warmth and glowing like a nuclear reactor about to blow. "How'd you know I don't smoke Luckies?"

"Oh, please!" The creature shook her head. "We've been tracking you for years. You smoke Kent cigarettes. Too many of them."

"We all have our vices," Jack retorted. "At least I don't go around abducting people in the middle of the night."

The female settled back in the bucket-shaped seat. "So tell me, Jack. Do I remind you of anyone?"

Jack squinted at her. "Gumby," he said after a moment.

"You can do better than that!" the creature told him, laughing. "For one thing I'm not green."

"What do you want me to say?" Jack asked. "That you look like Farrah Fawcett? You look like an alien."

"And so I am," she conceded. "*Halfalien*."

"And the other half?"

Her thin lips twisted upwards into a half smile as she replied softly, "Human," and, at that same moment, seemed to Jack to grow fuller and pinker, to become, in fact, more human.

"Wait a minute now!" he began, starting to his feet. "You're freaking me out here!"

"Relax, Jack!" she advised him as her body shrank and compacted and her hands sprouted additional fingers and her feet toes. "You were always so impatient. This will only take a moment." Her head deflated like a balloon and fluffy pink hair wafted up from her skull. Suddenly her almond shaped eyes shivered into a mica dust and fell away to reveal distinctively human eyes, except for the fact that her irises were of such an inky blackness that there was no distinction in color between them and her pupils. "So, Jack?" the creature asked—her voice sounded different now, more throaty than before and brittle with age. "Who do I remind you of now?"

"Good Lord!" gasped Jack. "Mama?"

"There are some things about the family that I never told you," the creature advised him. "Let's start with Grandma."

WHEN JACK'S GRANDMOTHER, BERTIE CUDMORE, WAS EIGHTEEN YEARS OLD AND still living at home in Denton, Texas, just north of Dallas, she fell in love with a mysterious, tall and very pale young man named Mr. Hargrove. This young man, who claimed to be a South Carolinian, roomed, as did several other tubercular gentlemen, with Bertie's family—the Cudmore fortunes having been to such a degree reduced by the Civil War that they were compelled to take in boarders to pay their back taxes, and West Texas being at that time a popular destination for consumptives, who hoped that its bone-dry air might improve their unhappy condition.

Mr. Hargrove was somewhat peculiar looking—he had a weak chin, a nose so small and dainty it could scarcely be said to exist and huge black eyes that glittered with perpetual fever. But then, Bertie—built like a fireplug, sallow-skinned and lantern-jawed—was herself no beauty. Mr. Hargrove was the first gentleman to glance in her direction and she was grateful for his kind attentions.

Mr. Hargrove and Bertie passed many a summer's evening playing duets together on the old square grand piano in the drawing room—Mr. Hargrove, who had extremely long fingers, was by far the better pianist. And this was not all they did together, as events would subsequently bear out.

They planned to marry. First, however, the young woman prevailed upon her fiancé, whose cough, though less wet, still rattled through him like a train through a station, to take a new sort of cure, one that was all the rage that year—a fresh air cure in the mountains of Colorado: patients washed down huge meals of eggs and rare beef with cream and stout at a common dining hall, then retired out of doors to spend their nights in tents pitched on the sanatorium's magnificent grounds high

in the Rockies. One night the temperature unexpectedly dipped and poor Mr. Hargrove, thin-blooded at the best of times, froze to death in his tent.

Or so the director of the sanatorium wrote Bertie when he returned to her by mail Mr. Hargrove's effects, including her fervent love letters to the unfortunate young man. He also advised the heartbroken girl that Mr. Hargrove was buried in a lovely spot on the grounds with a breathtaking view of snow-capped mountains.

In fact, they had erected a gravestone with Mr. Hargrove's name on it at the very spot described by the director, but that was the sum of it. The attendant at the infirmary where Mr. Hargrove's lifeless body had been deposited pending burial had stepped out for a smoke. When he returned a few minutes later, Mr. Hargrove had vanished. They searched the sanatorium and the grounds; they questioned all the staff; then, fearing the effect upon business that the news that they had somehow misplaced the mortal remains of a former patient might have, they hushed the entire matter up.

The news of Mr. Hargrove's death sent Bertie into a decline. Unable to keep any food down and, in consequence, weak and lethargic, she took to her bed. So prostrate was she that she failed to realize that her monthlies were late, indeed, that she had missed two altogether.

Then one night about nine weeks after the demise of her fiancé, she fell into a deep sleep, during which she had the most vivid dream: a person who greatly resembled Mr. Hargrove extracted something very small from her body, popped it into a glass bell jar and left her lying naked and strangely immobilized on a cold table in a room full of murmuring shadows. When she awoke the following morning it was to find herself similarly unclothed. If that were not, in itself, remarkable, given the fact she never slept naked, the nightgown which she had been wearing the night before lay neatly folded on her pillow. On it lay a single, windblown yellow rose, apparently plucked from the bush outside her bedroom window. Mr. Hargrove had several times during their courtship presented her with a rose from this same bush. The following day Bertie felt strong enough to rise from her bed and to take some nourishment, though her breasts ached mysteriously and there was a hollowness to her that there had not previously been.

"Some babies are found in cabbage patches, others on doorsteps," Ruth told Jack. "As for me, I was discovered in the roll-top of an oak secretary abandoned on the streets of Galveston after the Great Flood of 1900."

"Is that the same flood that washed away that furniture factory?" Jack



asked his mother. "What was its name? Needham & Co.?"

"The very one!" his mother replied. "The Great Flood of 1900. It was caused by a savage hurricane in the Gulf of Mexico and resulted in Galveston's near destruction. Six thousand people died in that flood."

"So how'd you end up in Altamount?" Jack asked.

"Your Uncle George," replied his mother. "He fetched me here."

GEORGE COTTENAM WAS THE CONDUCTOR OF THE KD SPECIAL, WHICH RAN FROM Joplin to Galveston. It was a famous train—F.D.R. himself rode on it once and Jack had the framed and signed photo of the president shaking hands with his Great Uncle beside the big steam locomotive to prove it, hung over his desk at the A-Patch. But that was much later, when George was on the verge of retirement. In 1900, he was still a young man, spare and neat in his navy blue, brass-buttoned uniform, handsome with a handlebar mustache.

The KD pulled into Galveston's Union Station a few days after the flood waters had receded. It was a special run; the train was loaded with relief supplies and passengers anxious to ascertain the safety of friends or relations. After he had handed off the last tremulous passenger, George took a stroll down the platform to where MacIntyre, the station master, was directing the crew unloading freight. "Hey, Mac," George greeted him. "How bad was it?"

"Plenty bad, George!" the station master exclaimed, wiping his bald head with a red bandana. "Everybody's lost somebody or is looking for somebody, but there's no holding bodies in this heat; you have to bury them straight away. So nobody knows who's dead and who's just lost. Hey, you there!" He turned his attention back to the crew. "Not there! Further down!"

George consulted his gold pocket watch: 2:05 and the KD wasn't scheduled to depart for another hour and a half. Time enough to survey the damage. George lit a thin Havana cigar and set out on foot down Broadway Avenue headed west.

He had gotten as far as 43<sup>rd</sup> Street when something tugged at his eye. He couldn't say exactly what it was; in fact, he didn't actually *see* anything, but only half registered it—a scintilla of light that scraped at his peripheral vision and then vanished. It seemed to him to have come from one of the darkened alleyways that opened off the ruined boulevard. Picking his way through debris left over from the flood, George arrived at the alley's entrance and peered into the gloom. Propped against the brick wall that dead-ended the laneway, he could just make out the outlines of what folks in West Texas would have called a secretary.

"Well!" George exclaimed. He turned around and headed back to the station where he took two boys off the loading team and returned with them to salvage the secretary.

"THE FOLLOWING DAY A BOY SHOWED UP AT THE FARM WITH A NOTE FOR MY DADDY," Jack's mama continued. "'Send the wagon for a pick-up at the station. Best bring Howie as it's a big one. I guess this settles that poker debt of mine! Your brother, George.' You remember Howie, don't you, son?"

"Granddaddy's brother," Jack replied.

"My mother, Bertie Cudmore, who would have married Mr. Hargrove but had to settle years later for Jim Cottenam, took quite a shine to that secretary," Ruth continued. "She had had to marry beneath her and the Cottenams didn't have many nice things. She made the men put it in the front parlor alongside that horrible, itchy old horsehair sofa and her little organ. 'It has good lines,' she told my daddy, running her hands up and down the secretary. (You remember that she had premature cataracts in both eyes ... could only make out the shapes of things ... shadows and light?) 'But what's this, Jim?' she asked, and she tugged at the roll-top's two brass knobs. 'The desk part won't open.' And sure enough, it was stuck shut.

"'Leave it for a few days,' my daddy suggested. 'The wood's probably swollen from the flooding. Let it dry out a little. If it don't open then, I'll work it loose.'"

"'Don't you go spoiling the finish, Jim Cottenam!' Mama warned him. She rode that poor man hard. 'This is a proper piece of furniture and I want it kept nice!'

"Two days later, she had just sat down in front of the organ to play a few hymns after supper when she thought she heard something coming from inside the secretary."

BEING NEAR BLIND, BERTIE COULD HEAR LIKE A DOG. SHE LISTENED INTENTLY FOR a moment then, hearing nothing further, she turned back to the organ and launched into the first bars of "Lead, Kindly Light!"

But there it was again.

Bertie stopped playing and sat still, her fingers poised over the keys.

The sound was soft but distinct. Like the sound a tiny kitten makes. A mewling sort of sound.

Bertie stood and groped her way over to the secretary. She leaned over and pressed her ear against the roll-top. No question about it. Something was inside the desk.

"Jim! Howie!" she called to the men sitting on the porch, smoking and

drinking black coffee flavored with chicory. "You get on in here! There's a cat in my *escritoire*!"

"A cat in your *what*?" Jim demanded.

"My secretary, you fool! Get on in here!"

But when the men finally succeeded in working the roll-top loose, what they found was not a kitten.

"Will you look at this!" Howie exclaimed.

"What is it?" Bertie yanked impatiently at her brother-in-law's sleeve.

"It's a baby," Howie explained. "At least, I think it's a baby."

"A right peculiar looking one," Jim agreed.

"Is it colored?" Bertie wanted to know.

Howie shook his head. "No'm, it's white. Too white for my liking. What do you think, Jim?"

"Could be one of those albinos," Jim suggested.

"Eyes aren't pink," Howie pointed out. "In fact, will you look at those eyes!"

"Pick it up, one of you," Bertie insisted. "Give it to me."

"Ever seen eyes like that on a baby?" Howie asked.

"Careful of its head!" Bertie warned her husband. She and Jim had no children and Howie was a bachelor. Gingerly Jim scooped up the bundle and transferred it to his wife's arms.

"My, oh, my!" she exclaimed. "This little old baby can't weigh more than four pounds. What is it now? Boy or a girl?" She worked her fingers under the blanket. "It's a girl!" she decided.

"We'd best be telling somebody," Howie said. "Folks be looking for this child down in Galveston."

"You don't know that!" Bertie objected, squeezing the baby tighter to her chest. "Likely, her people are drowned."

"Still, Bertie, we have to *try* to find them," Jim pointed out.

"No, you don't!" she informed him. "You know how much I've always wanted a child and now God drops one in our lap and you're after giving it away?"

"Giving it *back*!" Jim clarified.

"This is my baby and I'm keeping it!" Bertie insisted.

Howie scratched his head. "Now, Bertie," he said, "if you could see the child, you'd probably be just fine with giving it back. It don't look proper."

"He's right, Bertie!" Jim agreed. "It's dead white and too small and kind of limp ... I think it's sick."

"Well, if she's that homely, it's a good thing I can't see," Bertie retorted. "I'm going to call her Ruth, after Ruth in the Bible. Because she came to



me from a strange land.”

Later, after Bertie had gone upstairs to make a bed for the baby by stuffing a feather pillow into a dresser drawer and, just generally, to fuss, Jim and Howie sat on the porch watching as the sun burnt a hole in the horizon on its way down.

“I’d guess she’s set on keeping that child,” Howie observed.

Jim shrugged. “I ’spect so.”

“DADDY AND UNCLE HOWIE GRILLED UNCLE GEORGE TO MAKE SURE I WASN’T HIS love child by some floozy,” Ruth told Jack. “George was kind of a lady’s man; he was rumored to have a woman at every stop. But he maintained his innocence, so all three of them traveled down to Galveston to see if anybody was looking for me. Turned out: nobody was.”

“But how was it I never heard you were adopted?” Jack asked. “In this part of the world, a secret’s not a secret; it’s news.”

“At first there was a good deal of speculation,” Ruth acknowledged. “Some people wondered, like Daddy and Uncle Howie had, if I didn’t belong to George. Others thought that they had heard somewheres that I was the child of some relations Mama had down in Galveston—that my real people had drowned in the flood and she and Daddy had taken me in. But the version that won out was that Daddy and Mama had tried to have a baby for years and, just when they had about given up, along I came. People forgot that they had never seen Mama look in a family way, that Doctor Beatty had never been fetched in the middle of the night to deliver a baby at the Cottenam farm. Or they didn’t forget so much as not quite remember.”

Jack shook his head in disbelief. “Now, Mama,” he told Ruth, “in my experience, people remember those sorts of things.”

“Not if it can be arranged otherwise,” Ruth corrected him.

“What do you mean?” Jack asked.

“This discussion we’re having now, Jack... You won’t remember it tomorrow or, if you do, it will be as a dream, all fleeting and in fragments.”

“I could never forget this,” Jack protested.

“But you will, son,” his mother advised him. “You have before.”

“Hold on now!” Jack said. “This has happened before?”

“Of course, Jack,” Ruth replied. “Oh, I wasn’t here, not being dead at the time, but you’ve been in this lab many times since you were a small child. You’ve been tested. Samples have been taken. Every few years we install a new tracking device...”

“Tracking device!” exclaimed Jack. “I can’t believe this shit!”

"Jack!" Ruth chided him gently. "Language!"

"And that's another thing!" Jack pointed out. "You taught Sunday School!"

"Those silly old stories!" Ruth laughed. "You never believed them anyhow. Come on, be honest. Did you? Would you like another cigarette?"

"No, I never believed them," Jack admitted, "and, yes, I'd like another cigarette."

"What's the magic word?"

"Please!" Jack muttered ungraciously. Ruth handed him a fresh cigarette and the Zippo.

"Of course," she reflected, "the irony was that what people eventually remembered to be true was, in fact, the version closest to the truth."

"What do you mean?" he asked.

"That Mama was, in fact, my biological mother," she replied.

"Wait a minute!" Jack objected. "You were found inside the roll-top of a desk and yet somehow Grandma was your mother?"

Ruth nodded. "By Mr. Hargrove," she explained. "You see, all those years ago before Mr. Hargrove disappeared in Colorado, Mama was in the family way. Not for long. Eight or nine weeks. She didn't realize it at the time. She missed a few periods, felt ill, then had a very heavy one and that was all it was as far as she was concerned. What had happened, of course, was that I had been removed from her womb and transferred to a gestator inside this hover lab—there's quite a nursery here. I'll show it to you if you like, although you have seen it before."

The fragment of a memory blew through Jack's mind—a dim, echoing vault stacked high with glass carboys in each of which a baby floated...

"You were transferred to... what? A gestator?" he asked.

"A machine that simulates the womb," his mother explained. "That is the usual procedure with hybrids. We're kept in the gestator until we are nine months old. Then we are taken out and assigned to our post..."

"Hybrids?" Jack demanded.

"Your grandfather was an alien," Ruth clarified. "Mr. Hargrove, that is." She leaned over and laid her hand on his trembling knee. "Are you all right, Jackie? You look a little... green."

LATER, AFTER JACK HAD THROWN UP THE BITTER CONTENTS OF HIS ILL-USED stomach, his mother continued with her story: "In spite of all Daddy and Uncle Howie's head shaking, I never had a sick day in my life—after all, I had been engineered to last seventy-five years—and, just as everyone forgot my origins, so they ceased to notice that I was somewhat peculiar looking. In those days, everyone in West Texas married their first cousins,

so the fact that I was abnormally pale and chinless wasn't that unusual. How are you feeling, son?"

"Horrible," muttered Jack.

"You haven't been eating properly since I died," she pointed out. "Don't think I don't know."

"Well, what am I supposed to do?" Jack complained. "You wouldn't let me in your kitchen. I don't know how to boil water."

"I always thought you would marry," Ruth said, her voice ragged-edged with regret. "Anyway, not knowing how to cook is no reason for living on red-hot chicken wings and bourbon."

"Don't forget the nachos!" Jack reminded her.

"Why don't you try some of those Weight Watchers dinners?" Ruth suggested. "You could stand to lose some weight, Jack, and they do provide a balanced meal."

"I don't want to talk about my diet, Mama," Jack said. "I want to talk about you. It's not every guy whose mid-life crisis culminates with finding out his mother is an alien..."

"Oh, your mid-life crisis is just beginning, Jack," Ruth corrected him, "and, strictly speaking, I am not an alien. I am a *hybrid*... and, so, for that matter, are you."

Jack groaned. "Oh, no! Tell me Daddy was my daddy! Not some alien I don't know about!"

"Don't worry. Daddy was definitely your Daddy," replied Ruth. "That's the whole point of the colonization project, after all—expansion through cross breeding."

"Thank God for small favors!" said Jack. "So, tell me. Did you know you weren't like everybody else? I mean, when you were growing up?"

Ruth nodded. "From the time I was very little."

"How?"

"Oh, I was told."

"Told?" Jack asked. "By who?"

"By *whom*," she corrected him. "By voices."

"Voices? As in 'voices in your head' voices?"

"No. As in 'voices through the wormhole' voices."

"Wormhole? What wormhole?"

"The one in the secretary," Ruth replied.

"RUTH!"

Ruth lifted her fingers from the organ's keys and her feet from off the pedals and listened. Her mother was at the Sewing Bees and her dad and Uncle Howie slopping hogs out back. Yet this voice sounded both near,



as if it came from inside the sitting room, but strangely hollow at the same time, as if it came from down a cistern.

“Oh, Ruth!”

The little girl swiveled around on the organ stool to face in the direction of the sound. “I don’t see you,” she said. “Where are you?”

“In the secretary,” the voice replied. “Come closer so we don’t have to shout.”

Obediently Ruth slid off the stool and padded in her stocking feet over to the secretary.

“Now lift the roll-top!” the voice instructed her.

Grasping the roll-top’s two brass knobs, she opened the desk. Before her gaped a row of pigeonholes, all empty.

“Yes?”

“Lean closer and we’ll tell you a story,” the voice replied.

“I DON’T GET IT,” COMPLAINED JACK. “WHAT’S A WORMHOLE?”

“A hole in the space time continuum,” Ruth replied. “Surely you’ve heard of black holes!”

“Well, yeah,” said Jack. “Aren’t they some kind of weird holes in space that suck stuff into them?”

“Close enough,” conceded Ruth. “But there are different kinds. It’s possible to fall into some black holes (the ones that rotate and have charge) and not hit what physicists call the singularity—which you might want to think of, Jack, given a world view shaped by Marvel comics, as the *ka-boom* point. The point where you are ripped apart by tidal forces. Are you with me so far?”

“I guess,” Jack sulked, offended by her reference to Marvel comics, which he had collected in his haphazard, shuffling way for thirty years.

“What you may not know,” Ruth continued, “is that, in addition to there being black holes in space, there are also white holes. These are the exact opposite of black holes: something into which nothing can fall. So a black hole can only suck things in, while a white hole can only spit them out.”

“So?” Jack asked.

“So, if you can join up the right kind of black hole with a corresponding white hole, you have a wormhole—something that sucks you in one end and pops you out the other. *Voilà!* Space travel which, given intergalactic distances, is also time travel.”

“And there was one of these wormholes in that secretary?” Jack asked.

“Two,” she corrected him. “The outgoing wormhole was built into the second pigeonhole from the right; the incoming in the far left one. Let

me tell you a sad but romantic story.”

Jack groaned.

“Listen!” his mother insisted.

BERTIE TOOK HER LETTERS TO MR. HARGROVE AND THE LETTERS THAT SHE HAD received from him and made a bundle, tied round with a red ribbon. Now and again she would untie the ribbon and re-read the letters, until, by the time her cataracts had ripened to the point where she could no longer make out the script, she knew them off by memory.

The difficulty lay in finding a safe place to secret the letters where her husband, who did not know that Mr. Hargrove had ever existed, would not discover them. It was not long after Ruth had been discovered in the secretary that Bertie struck upon the excellent idea of hiding the letters in the desk. Jim and Howie were reluctant to go into the sitting room at any time: the way they perched on that horsehair sofa when the preacher paid a visit, you would have thought it was a bed of hot coals. And she had thoroughly briefed them on the torments they would endure were she to find so much as a scratch on her precious secretary—Bertie might be blind, but her sense of touch was all the more acute for that.

One day, when Jim and Howie were gone to town, she transferred the letters from their present hiding place in her rag drawer to one of the pigeonholes in the secretary. As she tucked the packet into one of the pigeonholes, she thought she felt a slight tug and a strangely ionized coldness leaking from the hole. No sooner than she had registered this sensation than a knock sounded at the front door. Overcome with confusion, Bertie, pulled down the roll-top, locked it, and tucked the brass key into her apron pocket. She groped her way to the door to find Mrs. Beatty, who had come to buy eggs.

Later that afternoon, after Jim and Howie had returned from town and were washing up for dinner, Bertie stole back into the sitting room, unlocked the roll-top and felt for the packet of letters. It was not there. Like the mysterious Mr. Hargrove, it had vanished without a trace.

“Until her death (and that was not for twenty-five years, Jack, a long time to be in suspense), Mama waited for the moment when Daddy would confront her with the packet of letters. At first she dreaded what she thought was an inevitable confrontation; then, as the years went on, she came to long for it. She wanted it to happen. She played it out in her head over and over again: what he would say; what she would say... It never happened, of course. Daddy didn’t have a clue. On her deathbed she tried to have it out with him but she was too weak and Daddy was too deaf. ‘The letters!’ she croaked.

"And Daddy said, 'What, Bertie? Speak up!'

"And then Mama, who for two and a half decades had seen nothing but light and shadow, saw a greater light than she had ever seen before and the shadow of Mr. Hargrove coming through it, stretching out his hand towards her—"

"Wait a minute!" Jack cut her off.

"What, Jack?" his mother asked.

"I'm remembering something," he said. "Something strange. Something to do with your funeral."

"Oh, yes," replied his mother. She smiled, nodded. "I was wondering whether you'd remember that."

THE ODD THING ABOUT RUTH WENGER'S FUNERAL WAS THAT THERE WAS NO BODY. Of course there *had* been a body. Everyone could attest to that: Jack had found her, after all, and Dr. Beatty Jr. had examined her and signed the death certificate. A postscript to her will reminded Jack of her wish not to be embalmed and he had successfully fended off the desperate attempts of the local undertaker to hustle her back to his lair and pump her full of formaldehyde.

It was mid, scorching summer when Ruth passed, so the funeral was set for the very next day. Folks mobilize quickly around a death in West Texas. All day long friends and relations filed in and out of the little frame house which she and Jack had shared his whole life. Women brought molded salads and casseroles. Men brought liquor and stashed the bottles on the back porch next to the kitchen door.

Then, suddenly, they were gone, everyone but Jack and his mother, who lay in her white and gilded open casket looking, despite the makeup which her niece, an aesthetician, had liberally applied to her face, paler and more bug-like in repose than ever before (everyone had commented on this, though not to Jack). The bereaved son sat down in the darkened living room to visit awhile with Jack Daniels and Jim Beam and to keep his mother what company he could. It ended up being quite a visit at the conclusion of which he dozed off. When he woke up, Ruth was gone.

Jack looked everywhere he could think of. A number of possibilities occurred to him. She had not died at all but only fallen into a coma and now she was out wandering around the streets of Altamount in her best Sunday dress but with no shoes, looking dazed and painted to within an inch of her life. Or perhaps she had been dead after all, but dogs had dragged her off while he slept.

In the end, he shut and locked the casket and told everyone who asked that the heat had begun to get to her. The funeral took place and the



empty coffin was buried in the Methodist cemetery and a gravestone was erected over it, "Ruth Cottenam Wenger, beloved wife of Robert, mother of John." And Jack had somehow misplaced the entire memory.

"Where did you go?" he asked now.

"Why, I climbed out of the coffin while you was sleeping and slipped through the wormhole back to here," Ruth explained.

"What I don't understand," said Jack, "is how there came to be a wormhole... Excuse me. *Two* wormholes in Grandma's secretary."

"Installed at our Galveston nanofactory," Ruth told him. "All the desks made in that factory were fitted with wormholes and then shipped out all over the United States and into Canada."

"You folks set out to conquer the planet through *pigeonholes*?" Jack was incredulous.

"Don't forget that you are one quarter extra-terrestrial yourself, my dear," Ruth reminded him. "And the factory in Galveston was just one of thousands, producing all sorts of products: pipes, tires... anything you can fit a wormhole in. And it's never been our object to conquer Earth, just to colonize it."

"Hold it right there!" Jack objected. "You can't colonize the United States of America! There are people living here. Americans!"

"Now when did you get all patriotic, Jack?" his mother asked him. "It must have been since the Vietnam War. And, if I may remind you, there were Native Americans living in West Texas when your Wenger ancestors decided that this looked like a mighty good place to raise a little cotton." She shrugged. "Besides, we're not just colonizing the United States. We're colonizing the entire planet."

"And how do you propose to do that?" Jack asked.

"We're doing it right now," his mother pointed out. "First we increased our wormhole capacity—established as many wormholes as possible from our planet to Earth. Then we bred as many hybrids as possible and seeded the general population with them. (That's where you were supposed to come in, Jack, if you'd only found a nice girl and settled down, but you were always the diffident sort!) Eventually these various initiatives will allow us to establish diplomatic relations with human beings so that, very soon now, our empire times will realign themselves, making trade possible."

Jack stared at her. "So that's what you want?" he asked. "Not world domination? Not racial supremacy? Not annihilation of the human race?"

"We just want a larger trading area," Ruth replied.

"So you can sell your stuff?"

"So we can sell our stuff."

"Well," reflected Jack. "That seems ... not so bad."

"See!" Ruth exclaimed. "You're beginning to understand!"

IN THE EARLY HOURS OF THE MORNING, THE ALIENS RETURNED JACK TO HIS BED IN the little house on Buchanan Street. He awoke, feeling out of sorts and stiff, a state he attributed to too much Jack Daniels the night before—that he would have drunk too much whiskey or smoked too many cigarettes was a safe assumption, given Jack's bad habits.

Later that morning he noticed the note which he had made to himself to return the antiques buyer's call. He called the number and asked to speak to Liz Brown.

"I'm sorry, Miz Brown, but I can't sell your guy the secretary," he told her. "It's been in my family a long time. My mother would turn in her grave if she heard I'd packed it off to some stranger." He wondered how his mother could turn in her grave when she was not actually in her grave, then shook his head. Where did that come from? he wondered. Of course she's in her grave. We buried her, didn't we? And didn't I have the hangover to beat all hangovers?

That night Jack wandered into his living room with a glass of whiskey in his hand. The place was a shambles, piled high with old newspapers and comic books. He just couldn't keep things nice the way his mama had.

"Something about this secretary?" He spoke the words aloud. "What is it?" The faintest of memories, but so shy that it kept to the shadows. He tried to coax it out. "Come on. Come on. What is it now? What is it?"

Setting the drink down on top of the organ, he lifted the roll-top. Learning closer, he peered intently at the pigeonholes from one of which, it seemed to him, he could feel a kind of cold, ionized tugging.

That's funny, he thought. It's like there's a draft or something. But where would it be coming from? Certainly not from outside: it had been hot enough for the Mexicans to still be frying tortillas on the sidewalk out front of the roadhouse when he had picked up his paper bag of high-voltage takeout barbecue after work.

He sniffed at the pigeonhole. The intake had a funny smell, faint, but distinct and somehow familiar. He tried to place it, then suddenly remembered the time when, as a cub reporter, he had visited a Colorado gold mine to do a story. The crew boss had taken him deep underground to let him know how it felt to have that the equivalent of eight stories of earth and rock pressing down on you from above, but what he chiefly remembered was the quality of the air—cold, slightly congealed and

somehow lively. Like the air coming from the pigeonhole. It smelled like that and it... for lack of a better word, *felt* like that too. Thickened, chill and charged.

Jack glanced up suddenly, his ears pricking. What was that sound? He frowned. "Damn it!" he said aloud. "But I fixed that, didn't I?" He was referring to the doorbell which, of late, had taken to humming so faintly that the sound was almost imperceptible. Almost, but not quite. "Didn't I disconnect it or something?" he asked himself. "I'm sure it's on my to-do list..."

Then he realized that the humming was not coming from the foyer but from the pigeonhole. "Well, I'll be..." he began and, bending over, without knowing what possessed him, he reached into the pigeonhole with his right hand and promptly disappeared. ♣

### **in upcoming issues...**

In upcoming issues of *On Spec*, you'll find new work by GARY ARCHAMBAULT, ELIZABETH BEAR, E.L. CHEN, JEAN-CLAUDE DUNYACH, KARL JOHANSON, JAY LAKE, CHRISTIAN MCPHERSON, PHILIP RAINES & HARVEY WELLES, RANDY SCHROEDER, WES SMIDERLE, TOM SWEENEY, KAREN TRAVISS, and many more!



*I grabbed a few people to ask if they'd  
seen a little girl. Just got pity and head  
shakes. I walked faster and called  
louder...*

# Dropouts

Terry Hayman

## TIME IS MONEY.

That's the first thing you learn when you're building a business.

Lesson two is that family needs time.

Trying to learn lesson two, I was sitting on a supposedly Paris-bound plane, stalled on the runway. Beside me, the younger of my two kids was begging to get onto my wife's, Jocelyn's, lap. I gritted my teeth, leaned out towards the aisle and reviewed my handheld. Three deals I could have been closing today. And if my assistant even—

"This is your captain speaking. We regret to announce that due to security concerns this flight is now canceled. We recommend you see our—"

"No!" I snapped my handheld closed and ignored the staring faces as I turned to Jocelyn. "I told Harry you wanted to get to Paris. He guaranteed me this flight."

"I thought it was just cheaper than—umph."

My little girl, Tabitha, had just jumped onto Jocelyn's lap. She was

waving her Silly Putty-covered hands in her mommy's face and I could smell the cherry chewing gum she was smacking. I could also smell my own sweat and that of the guy directly ahead of me. Blowers weren't working right. Burnt plastic smell.

"Harry said faster." I sat back, my chest squeezing. I'd marked off just one week for this holiday. Now...

"Look, Daddy," Tabby said as she waved her hands towards me. "I getted my hands purple!"

I forced a smile. "You did, honey. You look like you've been eating boogleberries. Davey, clean your sister's hands, please."

My seven-year-old son nodded his head with a gap-toothed grin. "Here, Tabby." He pulled her back to his seat.

As he took her, I turned to Jocelyn. She suddenly leaned to me and put a soft hand on my cheek. Her hair smelled like flowers and sun as she kissed me. "It's okay," she whispered. "We'll do Paris another year."

I stared at her. Touched her hair. "No," I said. "Today."

I leaned forward, fumbled my cell phone out of my black leather carry-on, and stayed down to key through to Harry's number. It rang, clicked, and a mechanical voice told me the number was no longer in service.

"What the—?" I redialed and got the same message. Nonsensical. Harry was with a big agency downtown. *And* I'd spoken to him at this number just before the flight to thank him for the quick service. I frowned, connected to my internet server and checked directory assistance for Glory Travel in Toronto. The server said no listing and disconnected me. I swore and went back to phone mode, dialing 4-1-1 and giving the agency name.

There was a pause, then a live human came on and said, "There's no listing for that business, sir."

"What do you mean?"

"There's no listing, sir."

"Fine. Any travel agency. Pick one."

"We have no travel agencies listed, sir."

"I have to give you a name?"

"No. We have no travel agencies listed."

I transferred the call to my left ear and put my finger against my right to block out the whine of the blowers. "Now look..."

Something tapped me between my hunched-down shoulders and I broke off my call. One of the flight attendants, male with dyed blond hair and an eerily perfect nose, was forcing a smile as he shook his head at me.

"What?"

"No cell phones on the flight, sir."

I snapped my cell phone closed and swung my body up. "There's no smoking either, right? But I smell lots of that. Besides, we're not *on* a flight anymore, are we?"

"Even on the ground, sir, cell phones are not permitted." He held out his hand, still smiling. "I'll return it to you when we deplane."

"Kiss mine," I said.

"Howard!" Jocelyn had swung back to me with a shocked expression. Davey was grinning at me from over Tabitha's head with his two grown-up front teeth still half-grown in. Great, *Kiss mine* would probably now become his favorite expression when he was with his friends. Then *Piss off*. Then silence. Leave home. He'd visit only when I bent his arm behind his back. When I threatened to cut him out of my will.

Okay.

Okay.

Breathe.

I handed over the phone.

TIME.

Twenty minutes back to the departure gate and off. We'd be another fifteen to the ticket counter because the moving walkway was so damned—

"Howard?"

I turned to Jocelyn. "What?"

"Where's Tabitha?"

I blinked. Stupidly, I thought I'd been carrying her. But obviously I'd put her down, or she'd wriggled down. "Davey?"

"Here, Dad."

"Do you see, Tabby?"

He shook his head.

"Can you run back and find her?"

And he took off, his gangly limbs pumping hard, and I smiled after him. Enthusiastic kid. Just like I'd been at that age. And devoted to his little sister who worshiped him. He'd find her.

Or ... not? For just a second I had a flash of Tabby gone and what that would feel like. My chest squeezed again and my nose filled with the smell of smoke and coughing like my world was burning.

"Ungh!" I almost tripped on the conveyor belt teeth. We were at the end of the walkway and stumbled off. "Davey!"

Davey popped out a ways back and shook his head.

"Howard?" Jocelyn's voice had the first notes of panic. But she wouldn't

let it take her. Not my elegant, sunny-haired Jocelyn.

"It's okay," I said. "I'll look here. You keep going and get one of the airport staff from the terminal."

She nodded and I went for Davey. "Couldn't see her, Dad," he said when I reached him.

"You look on that side of the walkways." I pointed. "Call out her name. Come back here as soon as you reach the end."

He nodded and took off, calling out for his sister. So did I, walking and yelling. I grabbed a few people to ask if they'd seen a little girl. Just got pity and head shakes. I walked faster and called louder.

When I'd made it back to the departure gate end of the walkways, the fear was finally a gritty ball in my gut. "Damn it," I said. I started jogging back to our departure gate but a short woman with red hair was pulling a line of yellow tape across the hall just before the corner.

"Sorry, sir. This area's out of bounds now."

"But I need to find my little girl. She's three. She might have gotten turned around and run back this way. Just give me two minutes—"

"Sorry." And now two airport guards had stepped up behind her.

"Damn it, then you go. She's three years old. Curly blond hair right down to here. Jeans, a pink sweatshirt with a kitty-cat on it. We got off at Gate 33."

"Sir..."

*"Go look right now!"*

The short redhead sighed, looked at her coworkers, and disappeared back around the corner. I tried to crane my head to see back where she was going, but everything seemed more angled and twisted than I remembered. I shook my head and stepped back to one of the few windows. Everything must have clouded over outside because the window was so gray it was almost opaque. No, it *was* opaque. Like they'd dropped a sheet down over the outside.

"Hey!" I said to one of the guards. "You closing this whole arm?"

"Hunh?" said the one with the buzz cut.

"The tape. The blinds on the windows. There a hurricane warning or something?"

"This part of the terminal's closed."

"Closed."

"Yup."

"Where's the woman looking for my kid?"

A shrug.

I smelled sharp fumes, like a chemical fire. Maybe Tabby had gotten too close and passed out. "Please go check for me."



The other guard stepped up. "Look, buddy. She finds her, she'll bring her, okay?"

"No, *you* look..." But then I heard Jocelyn's voice, high and stressed. Calling my name over and over.

I spun and began jogging back in her direction. I jumped over the rail onto the rumbling walkway to double my jogging speed.

There were no people up and down this stretch anymore. None anywhere except up at the end of the moving walkways section where Jocelyn stood with some uniformed guy. The hall bent out of sight beyond them. The windows were all grayed over. The air was getting thick and heavy. And where was Davey?

It was like one of those old telescoping sequences where the long hallway suddenly seems endless and hollow. I picked up my jog to a full-scale run, my heart jumping in sudden terrified leaps to my throat. "Davey!" I yelled as I pounded along. I looked right and left in case he'd fallen down here. "Davey!"

Then I reached Jocelyn and saw she was bawling hard. Her mascara ran down her cheeks and her pulled-back blond hair fell in uneven strings and loops around her face. It made me go calm. One of us had to be.

I took her by both arms. "Where are the kids?" I said.

"I don't kn-know. I can't... Nobody can find them."

"Either of them?"

She bobbed her head, threatening to collapse to the floor, and my eyes shot to the airport guy she'd found to help her look. And jeez if it wasn't the blond jerk, the flight attendant with the dyed hair and perfect nose who'd taken my cell phone away.

He nodded sympathetically. "We looked all over, sir. Paged them both. Nothing."

"Nothing," I said angrily.

"That's right, sir."

*Nothing. Not here. No agents. No go.* "Well, I'm sorry, mister, but that is just—not—acceptable. I demand that you find my little girl and my son—both of them—right now. Whatever it takes."

He frowned at me. "You're certain, sir? Whatever it takes?"

"You heard me!"

Then my throat got suddenly tight as I heard running steps behind me and swung around. It was Davey running at me with his arms up. "Dad!"

I grabbed him up and swung him around like I remembered doing so much more often when he was only two years old. Before my drive to make money had really taken hold and time had become so expensive. "Oh, Davey!" I choked into his shoulder.

Stopped.

Jocelyn was gone.

The blond idiot was still there, though, watching me with concern, his starched navy blue uniform somehow a simple one-piece blue suit now.

I lowered Davey slowly down but he clung hard around my legs and I kept my hand on the back of his head. Hard, substantial little head. "Where's my wife?"

The idiot cocked his head to one side. "You said to bring back your children. We brought back one."

The air was really thick around me now. Chemical. "Is this some kind of sick game? *Where is she?*"

The man looked down to the left as if he was checking something, then straightened up with a firmer expression. "It's a matter of money, sir. Your account fell below full support mode an hour ago, so we've been allowing dropouts as per your instructions. Your remaining time is being directed to your highest priorities."

"What?" I sucked in a hard breath, fighting off a swirl in my head. I held the back of Davey's head to ground myself but ... but...

*It's just his head, his thirty-four-year-old severed head that I've scabbled up from the still-burning ruins of our house.*

*Gas explosion. Davey, visiting, had gone to check and...*

*And my own old arms, legs, chest, and face are screaming with pain, the flesh burnt black. Third-degree burns. Blunt trauma injuries. Cooked meat. Dying. Not going to make it. Despite all the money. Despite all the medical insurance and hospital high-tech I've peddled. And grown-up Tabitha is dead. Jocelyn, the love of my life, is dead. I'm going to die.*

*The sirens are screaming down our block. I'm holding Davey's bloody severed head. My legs shake.*

*Then the sirens carry me to the hospital, swaying, the pain impossible both in my body and in my heart, so tight I'm going to implode. They strap me into palliative. They wire my brain. All my hospital contacts are paying off. They're giving me the very latest options reserved only for the wealthy...*

I gripped the blond man's arm. "What do you...?"

*I can't breathe. The air is too thick. Intubated. I'm intubated, anesthetized, and wired for virtual reality.*

"The funds in your account are running out, sir. Unless there are hidden accounts you haven't told us about?"

By squeezing my eyes and breathing deeply, I snapped myself back to his face and the airport hallway, but everything was getting grayer around me. Davey was gone. And I recognized the blond idiot now. He'd flicked up my eyelids when I'd been wheeled into palliative after the explosion.

He'd explained I was simply not going to make it. Explained that they did have my global bank account's authorization on record. They could activate the time period I'd recorded with them when I'd sold them the equipment. As a joke, I'd done that memory suck. As a joke. If I ever had to do a palliative VR., I said, I'd want to spend it in better times, back when the kids were still small and Jocelyn and I... Simpler times.

My hands and legs were getting numb, the hallway around me almost black. I gagged at the feeling in my mouth and throat. "No hidden accounts," I said.

"Very well. Are there any last words you want to record for posterity here? Any last sights we could flash quickly for you?"

Everything was going numb. I could still stand, but all I could still see was myself now.

"I want..." I swallowed and licked my dry lips. "I want to hold my wife and kids again."

The doctor's voice was sad. "I'm afraid we can't do a full family reconstruction with the funds remaining. A quick visual, maybe. Or we can hold your own vitals, your sense of self and being alive for almost fifteen minutes more. This is the default, of course. Most patients choose to hang on as long as possible."

"No." I shook my head. "If you... cut everything except tactile and olfactory. Send me Jocelyn, Davey, and Tabitha. One at a time or all at once. Is there enough for that?"

He looked down and to the left. "Barely."

"Do it."

And...

*Everything falls black and silent.*

*I suddenly smell cherry bubblegum and feel Tabby's small, sticky hands. Then Davey, his clean little boy sweat and gangly arms wrapped around my waist. Finally Jocelyn—the perfume of flowers and sun, hands to my face, a soft kiss on my lips.*

*And in the end, as everything rushes away from me, these are enough. 🍁*

*It would have meant quarantine. It would have meant a delay in their return to Earth, but it should have been done. It should have been done...*

# Blood Factors

Patricia Dischner

“DO YOU WANT TO SHARE A TUBE?” LAURA SAW THE MAN PRESS his sleeve where the nipple implant in his arm lay hidden.

“No. There’s no point. I can’t stay here.” She didn’t tell him that her father had warned her not to share with men on the road, but he seemed to know anyway.

“I’m pure.”

She glanced up into his eyes. A flash, just to test him, but they never blinked. They were green eyes. How does a man get eyes that color? Lies a lot, her mother would say, can’t trust him.

“A quick share—no commitment.”

Laura’s eyebrows lifted. No lovemaking?

He smiled, and she pursed her lips.

“How do you know what I’m thinking?” He had such a nice mouth. He leaned it in close to her ear.

“It’s written on your face.”

“How do you resist those urges?” She had to ask because she’d never



heard of a man who, having shared with a woman, did not want to make love. Same-sex sharing evoked a different response, but sharing hetero was a process, first sharing, then lovemaking, a reciprocal involvement that might last weeks.

"Given a choice, I'd take the share," he said.

He was leading her toward the double doors of a huge building. His herding technique consisted of squints from the green eyes, and open smiles that split the mouth revealing straight white teeth and a tongue with a blister bar in it. The smooth knob of the bar was enticing by itself.

"What is this place?"

"The gym."

"The gym?"

"We can get something to eat here. Or—" He was laughing at her. "Shoot some hoops."

She gave him a wary look.

"You have to eat. Right?"

The gym was filled with men and women. Some, the better dressed, were clearly residents. They ran a cafeteria-like assembly line where the homeless, the road travelers, or simply the poor queued up to receive some nutrition.

Laura began to think about the man, assess him as her father had taught her. She had met him just inside the village, and she assumed he lived here; he had no pack. He seemed acquainted with the place, too, but that might mean nothing. She saw that his olive green trousers were frayed at the cuffs and his boots muddied; his loose jacket covered a shirt that bore tears.

"I'm camped outside the village," he said, handing her a heavy plate still hot from the dishwashers.

"For how long?"

"For as long as it takes to plow twenty acres."

"You work?"

He smiled again.

Laura flushed. "Excuse me."

"No worry."

"But you're not O-neg?"

"Unfortunately not. I'm a strong B-neg, disease free, and for as long as I last, a worker."

Laura took the plate and hugged it, gripping it at the center and resting her arms on it. *B-neg*.

Despite years of education and warnings against associating with the

immune-deficient off blood types, the ones that needed constant replenishment of antibodies, Laura was drawn to him. "My name is Laura Shropshire."

"I'm Hale McGill."

A tall, black man who was standing behind her in line bumped into her just then, and Laura fell into the B-neg man. Hale McGill did not feel disease prone. His young body was rock hard under the jacket. She felt muscle along his side and front as furrowed as the land he claimed to cultivate.

McGill's green eyes locked on the black man.

"Oh gee, sorry, man," the man was quick to say. "She's okay, see. Didn't drop her plate." Possession sensed in the look.

Laura sensed it, too. "I'm fine," she told the man. "No harm done."

McGill gave a little snort and turned away, but not for long.

"The food is good here," he said, glancing around again and stepping up in the line.

"Yes?" Laura *was* hungry; she'd been walking most of the day en route to the Roux River where her aunt would meet her and make the final settlement to her new position, a lab testing facility in Brookfield. She would live there at least a year selling her antibodies while her father tried to arrange a marriage for her. Smelling the food, her mouth began to salivate and her stomach rumble. McGill handed her the allotted three utensils swathed in paper napkin, and Laura passed her plate to the first kitchen worker. At the end of the line, she took the plate bearing a bowl of stew and a chunk of bread and trailed McGill to the far corner of the gym.

People sat everywhere on the floor, but the two found a small open space near a painted wall. Laura did not know why she followed him. Perhaps it was the conversation that linked them. On the road, the smallest offering of information seemed to beg familiarity. And this man had been forthcoming: he was twenty-four, he'd been alone since he was thirteen when his B-pos mother died of Varicella, he was a prince of the road, he said, self-educated and self-supporting.

McGill sat down against the wall and eyed her before taking his first bite. "I know a story."

"Yes?" She was at ease with him as she was with most people. Too fearless, her mother said.

The story, he said, was about a couple living in the international space station, Community.

"Space station?"

He pointed upward with a callused finger.

Ooh. A story about the time before the First Collation, when everything on earth had been techno-based, when there had been real hospitals, and space travel, and even television. Laura's eyes dilated to his satisfaction.

"They weren't married, yet," he began, "but they planned to be once they'd gotten their new orders to return to Earth. Any day."

McGill's voice was soft: "He called her Bride, not because that is what he hoped to make her, but because that was her name, Jen Bride. She called him Connor, and they drank in her room, no love-play this time, just making plans for the future. Although they were both officers, she had the higher rank, because she was a doctor..."

THE ROOM WAS A BLUE METALLIC, NOT LIGHT LIKE YOU SEE IN PICTURES OF THE time, but dark—everything dark. Low-level light bled from under cabinets and overhead along the coved ceiling. Her bunk levered down shimmering a midnight blue, the mattress pinched tight with a gray and blue striped blanket.

"We thought we might have uncovered a violation, today," she said to Connor and shifted on her bunk.

"What sort of violation?" he asked with wary interest. A violation was a failure or malfunction in one or more operating systems from human to mechanical aboard the structure.

"Something physical," she took a sip from her glass, "but it was a mistake. We reinserted the program and ran it again and it was okay."

"Flux problem?"

"Yeah."

"What program?" He asked her.

"Labs. But we're protected from anything known or alien. There hasn't been a germ on this vessel in decades."

McGILL'S VOICE LOWERED. "BUT CONNOR KNEW SOMETHING SHE DIDN'T. A package received via shuttle courier the week before had been moist with leakage. He and the on-duty porter had tried to control the contamination by throwing it into a vacuum chamber for desiccation. It appeared to dry sufficiently to allow them to dispose of it, along with their other refuse, into the stratos. But had they been in time? Connor couldn't say, but the manual was clear on the protocol; they should have advised the medical staff at once. It would have meant quarantine. It would have meant a delay in their return to Earth, but it should have been done. It should have been done."

The B-neg man paused.

"What happened then?" Laura asked him.

"You know the rest." McGill dropped his eyes to his plate and began to eat.

Laura rocked back against her pack, her eyes slit under the bright gym lights. "You made that up."

"I said it was a story." He lifted his shoulders.

Laura sucked in air, torn between the desire to kick the B-neg man or kiss him. His smug mouth begged her.

"How long have you lived here?"

"I'm not part of this village crew," McGill said. "I only happen in once or twice a week."

They were sitting cross-legged on the floor, shoveling down prairie loaf and the stew, which was laced with the essence of beef, but mainly consisted of vegetables. Vegetables are just fine and enough to sustain you, her mother always said. He dipped a segment of loaf in the stew and stuffed it in his mouth.

"Nice of you," he said.

"What?"

"To sit with me."

"Means nothing," Laura assured him.

"Don't I know it." He laughed and wiped his mouth with the bunched-up napkin. "Like my company though."

It was a statement and she didn't dispute it, but wiped her own mouth delicately, and eyed the people around her. All of them the same. Dressed in remnants, booted, wearing their clothes in layers to keep their packs light. She was better dressed than most. Her leggings were tight-stitched and her tunic was patterned.

"How does it feel to be protected?"

Did she detect bitterness in the question? His mouth opened for another bite, and she caught a glimpse of the blister bar. The eyes smiled. There was no doubt she was intrigued by him.

"It wasn't always so."

"For as long as I've lived, women have worn patches."

"O-neg women used to be ravaged for their blood."

The truth was, O-neg men wore patches, too, but were not as vulnerable as the women. There were fewer of them, and they were rarely seen on the road. A century and a half after the pandemic, it was the women who had become the more prominent universal donor. Their antibodies were less attenuated and better able to latch onto the cell for rebuilding.

"It would be nice not to have to plead to share a tube, that's all," McGill



said. He mopped his plate without looking at her. At least he was honest. Honest, and bitter.

Although an inner voice warned her about him, Laura's legs were stiff and wouldn't budge from the spot. She sensed an intensity emanate from him, hot and needful. She had a vague recollection of stories told, of mutant strains of men who used a mix of scent and physicality to subdue and subordinate women to gain the use of their blood. The women gave in willingly, so the patch was useless.

He put down his plate and stretched, palms upward, pushing at the ceiling of the gym. His shirt raised, revealing creased edges of muscle and the shallow notch of his navel. "I've got to get going," he said, rising to his feet.

"Oh." Laura was breathless.

"Thanks for the visit."

Laura found the use of her limbs and jumped up. "I'll share a tube with you."

His eyes flattened. "What?"

"No commitment, right?" she asked again in a whisper. It would be dangerous to repeat the offer out loud. There were too many people around.

She saw him swallow hard. He couldn't be pretending to be so surprised. "I promise."

Laura glanced from side to side, and he nodded to her and took her elbow, leading her away.

Outside the gym, the day had given up the sun and turned into early evening. The trees and bushes were motionless, without a hint of breeze to rustle their leaves, and the streets seemed to be already asleep, the sidewalks still warm from the day's searing heat.

Laura hesitated outside the building.

"Where do the people in the gym go?"

"They stay there. The residents clean up after the meal and hand out mats." The eyes were shining their citrine color. "You can go back in if you want."

Laura shook her head. She was moving, but slowly, hearing her mother's voice and all her *don'ts*, a litany of *don'ts*. She tried to focus on the road.

A brook ran through the town. The people here had built a brick-lined canal for it where it flowed and waterfalled, bubbling at varying levels next to the roadway. He led her over a bridge and down a lane where there were rows of cottages. Laura saw lights in the windows and gardens hemmed in by picket fences and smelling of jasmine and lemon.

Where were they going?

They were on the edge of the village now, and with each step the evening layered deeper in the gauze of night, shapes blackened, the road dimmed. A darkened tangle of wood appeared, trees wearing shrouds.

"Here." He climbed over a fence and down into a wash overgrown with brush and littered with stones. She followed him. Gnarled trees poked ebony branches upward; Laura tripped over their roots. "Mind that," he said, holding out a hand.

The tent was a small two-man. Nylon, zippered, with its mesh window open to the air. The B-neg man was anxious now, and knelt, holding a flap of doorway open for her. Laura scooted inside and looked around. There was a sleeping bag, a metal cookstove, a small plastic chest that was open and contained some clothes; shoes were propped against one sagging tent wall and next to them a small stack of books. The chest had a drawer at the bottom that McGill pulled out, removing from it a tube kit sealed in its wrapper. He handed it to her.

"Okay," she said out loud. She was breathing heavily now in anticipation of the act. How many times had she done this? Twice? Both times under her father's direction. Thinking of her father, Laura paused a moment. Her father would not like any of it, this smooth-talking stranger or her disobedience. Then she tore the bag open and put on the thin latex gloves. McGill had his jacket off and she saw that the shirt with the tears was sleeveless, his muscles bulged. The nipple lay in his forearm. "Okay," she said again.

He was nodding. "Relax. The patch is tied to your nervous system; it won't work if you're under stress."

"I know." Another lengthy moment.

McGill smiled. "Are you sure you want to do it?"

Her eyes hooked on his. "Yes."

Laura took a breath and pressed the five-digit pin number, the patch, on the ring of micro-buttons that ran along the outside edge of the flexible poly nipple fixed to her arm. The hole shuttered open. She inserted the hard tapered end of the flexible tubing until it stopped—two centimeters—then twisted it to lock it. The tapered end filled with blood. Laura then drew the other end of the tube into Hale McGill's nipple and locked it with a twist. Blood filled his end of tube, but his blood could not move past the collar. A needle on his end of the tube would allow a slow drip. Laura released the clip on her end allowing her blood to flow past the collar. She pinched the tube to start the drip. McGill drew her arm close to his and fitted them together snugly, lacing his fingers into hers. The flow of blood from the tube passed quickly as he squeezed her palm.

The drip would stop automatically after releasing a pint.

Laura closed her eyes a moment. While the act was sedating to her, his sensations would be sharpened. They both knew what reactions to expect. His face floated wavering before her, a blur of mouth and jaw, and as she grew sleepier, his green eyes narrowed on her. "McGill," she whispered.

"What?" A voice from far away.

"My father told me not to do this."

"Uh-oh."

She smiled at that. He was laying her down on the sleeping bag. She sensed the movement.

"I've heard of an O-neg male who has about thirty wives living upstate."

Laura squirmed on the down feathers. "That's him."

"Lucky to be him."

"Not too many like him," she agreed softly.

"Plenty B-neg men around."

"Yes, and other varieties."

Silence.

"McGill?"

Deep breathing. "Yes?"

"I wish there was a different ending to that story."

"So do I," he said.

HOURS LATER DAWN WAS BREAKING AND HIS STIRRING WOKE HER. SHE WATCHED his profile bend and his hands move to cinch his belt tight. He wore a different shirt, too, one with sleeves. A quarter sized viscous stain marked the spot where the tube had penetrated—the usual residue.

She knew that he had not touched her, save for the blending of blood. Pity that, she thought, in the next unguarded moment.

He noticed her watching him and smiled.

"Well," she said.

He nodded to her. "That will hold me ten months or so, maybe a year. Thanks."

She stretched and curled in the sleeping bag. "No problem."

"No, really, it's a gift. What changed your mind?"

Another stretch. "Green eyes." She saw him smile again. "Or that blister bar. Or maybe it was because it was my choice. It's nice to have a choice."

His face became quiet, his mouth still. He looked as if he might kiss her, then he blinked.

"Where are you going?" he asked.

"Brookfield."

"Yes, Brookfield. But where are you stopping?"

She paused. "I'm staying with my aunt."

"Well, can I come see you?"

"What ... in ten months?"

A chuckle, then the green eyes twisted away, his mouth curved down. They had no future together. These days blood was everything, and Hale McGill had the wrong type.

"I'll see you, then. I have to go to work."

She smiled a goodbye.

He unzipped the flap of the tent. His work boots, laced high to his ankles, were coated with dried mud. He was slow to leave. Squatting, he looked over his shoulder with those green eyes. "You know. You should be careful of men like me. Most of us, that is most, don't keep our promises."

Laura's eyes fanned open. "But you did?" She hated that it sounded like a question.

Green eyes, squinting. "I'm just saying, next time, you should listen to your father."

Laura heard him crush leaves as he walked away. 🍁

**MS lives here.**

There's one thing you can predict in life.  
MS makes life unpredictable.

**MS** Multiple Sclerosis  
Society of Canada

1-800-268-7582 [www.mssociety.ca](http://www.mssociety.ca)



# The Kasou of Sam McGee

*(With apologies to Robert William Service)*

Carolyn Clink

NORTHERN LIGHTS, CELESTIAL  
curtain rises as day breaks  
illuminating  
icy Arctic trails in  
this land of the rising sun.

Hari Kiri cold,  
steel blade through parka's fold, cut  
snow-blind Sam McGee,  
Tennessee-born peasant  
indentured to me for life.

He howled, whining  
louder than the running dogs  
now fed and dug in.  
"Don't bury my frozen bones,  
let me fly, set me free."

*continues...*

"I'm afraid," he moaned  
"the hellish cold will keep me  
from going home.  
Master, honor me when I  
pass, burn me into ashes."

Starry procession  
brings dawn, solitary sun  
pale as Sam McGee.  
Upon my ancestors, I  
swore, watch me now and weep.

Sled dogs pulled a corpse  
heavy with death and an oath  
unfulfilled.  
Why, why, why? Frigid snow asked.  
I raced on, to Lake Lebarge.

Ghosts of Nippon  
vanquished the enemy here—  
one more remains.  
Abandoned battleground, peace  
of fulfilled vision.

Glittering dreamlike,  
gunboat *Kamikaze*  
lay imprismed in ice.  
Chipping and chopping, I hacked  
passage onto that old ship.

Red crystal sunset.  
Scavenged, skeletal ship  
moaned under dead weight.  
In the hold, long forgotten,  
fire enough for Sam McGee.

Almost dawn, baying  
dogs witnessed my release,  
free of my duty.  
Phosphor sticks ignited,  
fireworks shattered dead silence.

Two suns rose,  
gold bars on a blue field,  
heat burned into thick ice.  
Sam McGee from Tennessee  
sputtered, fizzled, and sank.

Northern lights, celestial  
curtain rises as day breaks  
illuminating  
the icy Arctic trails in  
my land of the rising sun. 🍁

*"I think that when they first met, the moon fell in love with the earth. Madly, like I did for your great-grandma, and like your dad did for your mom..."*

# Under a Full Moon

Joshua Prowse

"CANADIANS," HE SAID, "ARE PATIENT."

It was fall and I was nine years old, doing research for my history report on the Lunar Slip. Mom suggested I talk to Great-grandpa; he had been in his twenties when it happened and was the last living person in our family to see the moon.

"Patient," he continued. "Not spineless, like the British, or reckless, like the Americans."

We sat on the porch, breaking walnuts for my Mom's baklava. The shells were woody and dry, and the smell reminded me of my father splitting kindling. Dad swung the axe out in the barn, his shirtsleeves pushed up over his elbows, and Great-grandpa broke walnut shells here on the porch in a grey wool sweater. They both grunted and perspired.

"So when the moon was suddenly just..." He flapped his hand in front of his face, as if shooing a fly, "*gone*, we kept our wits about us, mostly. No riots. No religious zealots *I-told-you-so*-ing on the CBC."



He fitted another wrinkled old nut between the jaws of the silver cracker and squeezed. He used both hands. I kept quiet and checked my little recorder's blinking battery meter anxiously.

"In the States," he said, "President McCaffrey—you should look him up on the web, interesting fellow—anyhow, he declared martial law. Can't really blame him; people were getting out of control. NASA and the United Europe Space Agency were sticking to the story that the earth was safe, but rumours spread that it was just a bunch of baloney meant to keep us all under control, so there was panic with a capital P. Domsday cultists on the news, looting in the cities, violence everywhere. I don't think declaring martial law improved the situation, but at least it gave the military official permission to continue shooting its most uncooperative citizens," he laughed. "In retrospect, some historians say it was an awful decision, but none of them was there. I was there. I saw what was happening, and I won't second guess anybody."

Great-grandpa scritchd at his grey-stubbled chin and sighed. "Americans are strange folks though," he said. "They locked themselves in their houses, in church basements, bomb shelters. And I'm talking about *intelligent* people. What I never understood is, if it's the end of the world, what the heck do you want to be locked inside for?"

I smiled. The battery light blinked.

"I'm sure by now you've figured out where the Church of the Lunar Deliverance comes from."

I nodded, but it was a lie. I'd never even thought about it before. To me, *lunar* just meant *mysterious*. "What were they saying on TV?" I asked.

"Well," he said, leaning back in his chair, "a lot of channels were completely off the air; your Home & Garden, your Golf TV and so on. Most others were playing a rotation of satellite photos and film from the observatories, mixed with footage from around the world, showing how the different countries were behaving." He laughed and shook his head. "I tell ya, in a time of crisis, fly me to Australia any day. Or maybe Sweden. They knew how to enjoy the end of the world. But stay the hell away from the U.S., or anywhere in South America for that matter. I won't go into details, but you can see all the video you want on the web," he said, but then added, "Just ask your mother first."

"What was so different up here?" I asked.

Great-grandpa picked up the crackers and detonated another nut. A piece of shrapnel leapt into his thick white hair, but he didn't notice. "Well, up here, people were scared for sure. Real scared, son. You really can't..." He took a deep breath. "How much do you know about what happened?"

"Not much," I said, "Mom said not to do any research until I talked to you."

"What an honor," he said, smiling. He wrung the nutcracker in his hands for a moment, then turned and looked through a window, into the kitchen, where my mother was making the pastry. "Did you tell her you love her yet today?" he asked sternly.

"Not yet," I said.

"Mmm," he said through pursed lips. "Well, let's not make this interview longer than we have to." He held his arms out in front of him, his hands clenched into fists as though riding an imaginary bike. "It was a comet," he said, and began moving one of his fists toward the other. "NASA said they'd been tracking the thing for years, and we were clear by thousands of miles, but that doesn't help much when you go to bed late one night and realize that it's still light out. *All night long*, I mean, we *knew* the nights were getting longer, and why, but when we had that first day for night..." He shook his head and looked out at his old, chapped fists, then lowered them to his thighs. "My father, your great-great-grandpa Johnny, he called the whole family into the living room there," he gestured over his shoulder, into the house, which had been in the family for over 200 years. "Family meeting! Unheard of for the man. Not a real involved parent, let Ma take care of us while he worked. He was quiet, loved the land," he said. "Kinda reminds me of you."

I smiled, and Great-grandpa looked at me appraisingly, with teasing suspicion.

"Anyhow, he started to say something to us, about how we were going to be okay, and not to listen to what other people were saying. I don't know exactly how it happened—I think he put his arm around my sister, Feeny—but pretty soon, the whole lot of us were in one huge circle, like a big huddle-hug, and my fath—" On the recording, his voice cracks here. "—your great-great-grandpa Johnny, well, he started to cry like a baby."

I remember Great-grandpa looking out at the yard then, over the long driftwood fence into the pastures and fields that stretched further than I could run in a day. The battery light was still blinking. Did I dare disturb him?

"And then your great-great-grandma started to cry," he said finally. "And then Feeny, and then on down the line from there."

"Did you cry?"

"Hell no!" he said, stomping his foot. "My big brother Ollie was dribbling quite a bit though," he said, laughing. "Oh son, it was something else. And you see, *that's* what the comet did. Not anything incredible

itself, but it certainly made us all do things that would have seemed incredible back when we thought we had a nice full well of days stored up."

A couple of crows cackled on the barn roof. A squirrel painted a furry swirl on the trunk of the elm tree as it circled its way home. I could smell old wheat and honey and the autumn dust from the fields.

"Where was I?" Great-grandpa asked, getting back on his imaginary bike. "Right. Up here. North of the 49<sup>th</sup>. What was different. Mmmm." He looked soberly at his closed fists. "We were patient," he said. "The comet got so close that it blocked out most of the sky. But even still, you could expect the corner store to be open, and water to come out of the tap. People kept going to work. A little quieter, a little paler, maybe, but going nonetheless. It gave us strength, somehow. Made us feel a little heroic, I think, like we were serving our country in our own small way. Hell, maybe we were just sheep, but I tell you, son, it sure didn't feel that way."

He paused for a moment, and then the fists began to move together.

"But let's get on with the show, eh?" he chuckled. "So, the end is nigh," he whispered ominously. Suddenly, his right thumb flicked up, "That's the moon, there," he said. "Not to scale, you understand." His left fist, the comet fist, approached, then dramatically passed over the earth fist, striking the moon thumb as it revolved behind the earth. "We slide under by the skin of our teeth, and whammo, the comet collides with the moon, smashing it into pieces," he said, opening the fingers of his fist for emphasis. "In four days, you couldn't find a speck of it left in the night sky. Gone." He let his open hand trail away behind him. Gone.

"But the most incredible thing," he said, raising his eyebrows and returning both his hands to his lap, "was the *silence*. Complete and utter silence. The collision *didn't make a sound*. There was a blinding flash, and power grids blacked out all over the world. It was some kind of electromagnetic effect, and with the comet destroyed, and its light gone, our half of the world got plunged into a total, silent darkness. No sound. No cars, no humming electrical wires, no TV, no echoing boom... We were all sitting right out there on the lawn when it happened, and I don't even think we heard any birds chirping. It was like silence had become a sound all its own, drowning out the rest of the world."

"Whoa," I whispered.

"Yeah," he laughed, "whoa. We had northern lights for weeks after," he said. "Beautiful, but when I see them now I get sick in my guts. I hope they lose that connection someday. Mmmm," he growled, chewing his lower lip. "But that wasn't the worst of it. Some debris made it through

our atmosphere, the biggest of which—”

“Moon Island,” I interrupted, leaning forward.

“Right,” he said. “Impacted off the northeast coast of Newfoundland, killing about a thousand people and causing waves that flooded Labrador and even reached some towns in Western Europe. It’s the biggest chunk of moon left, and the only one that took human lives.” Oddly, he started chuckling. “Lord-love those Newfies though. The island topped Ayer’s rock as the world’s most popular tourist attraction, and suddenly they were all off the pogeys, speaking Japanese and driving BMWs.”

I thought about pictures and old movies I had seen. The moon was ghostly, menacing. And the orange harvest moon was a monstrosity. Even the sound of it—*moon*—I was glad I’d never lived with it.

“Later, scientists predicted that without the moon, the earth’s environment would be destroyed. The tides would shift, women would stop menstruating, all kinds of stuff. We were all going to die after all. But the days became weeks, which became months, and slowly everything went back to normal. Folks started writing songs and poetry about the whole thing. Hell, the mint even put out a five-dollar coin—the moonie, we called it—with the moon on one side and Moon Island on the back. I may have one in my golf bag; used it as a ball marker. You can take it to class if you’re careful with it.”

“That’d be great,” I said.

He took up the crackers again and broke the last nut, slowly separating the soft meat from the hard bones with his thick, steady fingers. He threw handfuls of the shells off the porch, into Mom’s flower garden, then picked a large morsel for himself and chewed it. “So that’s it,” he said, thoughtfully. “Oh, and of course that’s where the saying *under a full moon* comes from; you used to say *when pigs fly* or *when hell freezes over* or something like that.”

He leaned down to pick up a shell that had fallen off the table. I reached out and gently plucked the piece of shell from his hair. I put it in my pocket. He sat up and threw his shell into the garden.

“But who really knows what will come of it all?” he said quietly. “It’s only been sixty-some-odd years since it happened, maybe we’re doomed yet. Mother Nature moves slowly about these things.”

“Maybe she’s Canadian,” I said.

Great-grandpa laughed. “Wouldn’t surprise me a bit, son.”

He let out a long wheezy sigh and slapped his thighs. “But enough science.”

The battery light stopped blinking. That’s where the recording ends. But I haven’t forgotten what he said to me next.



"Out of juice?" he asked as I whacked the little digital device against my chair.

"Yep," I said. "And it'll take me an hour to recharge it."

"Well, don't worry, we can pick this up later if you need more material," he said. He selected another piece of walnut and chewed. "Son, you know what the biggest loss is, with the moon, I mean?"

I shook my head.

"The romance. You'll never know what it is to be out with your girl—when you start *liking* girls, of course—with his huge, magnificent face shining down on you. Everything was better in the moonlight, my boy, everything. That moon, it was something everybody shared, but we all claimed it in our own way," he said. "It chaperoned all my dates with your great-grandma, gave us something to talk about when we were too nervous to hold hands." He laughed self-consciously, coughed into his sleeve, then picked up the crackers and squeezed them absently. "Now don't you go telling your folks any of this. This is between-you-and-me talk, right?"

"Right," I said.

"Mmm, right you are," he grumbled again. He flexed his fingers absently, giving away his poor circulation. Another thing that couldn't kill him. His two blue eyes, pushed back in his face like marbles in old bread dough, would conspire with cataracts in later years and try to blind him. His legs would betray his balance and break his hips. His lungs would deny him air, and if it came his heart would refuse to transport it. But none of these things could kill him.

"Think I can tell you something even crazier?" he asked.

"Sure."

"You won't tell a *soul*?" he asked, leaning forward.

I shook my head, no.

"Well, I don't think those scientists are telling the whole story. I don't think the moon was simply destroyed by a comet." He leaned close. "You know what I think?"

"What?"

"Promise you won't laugh?"

"Promise," I said, already giggling and moving closer, feeling his breath on my cheek.

"I think that when they first met," he whispered, "the moon fell in love with the earth. Madly, like I did for your great-grandma, and like your dad did for your mom. But after centuries and centuries of circling her without being able to touch her, he couldn't take it any longer. He decided he had no choice but to leave her or die of longing."

Great-grandpa levelled those old eyes on me. I held my breath. "But in the end," he said, "that ol' moon's heart broke from loneliness, out there in space, and he died anyway."

We heard the familiar stubborn crunching of gravel: my father coming down the laneway in the truck.

"You know," my great-grandpa said quietly, "every day afterwards, my pa came in the house and hugged us, said 'I love you' to us every day. And in my whole life, I only have one regret." He put the crackers down on the table, stood up and stretched to greet my approaching father. "I should've cried, son. Now go inside and see your mom like I told you."

GREAT-GRANDPA OUTLIVED HIS WIFE, WHICH WAS CONSIDERED A HORRIBLE injustice; she ate right and walked to Dell's variety in town almost every day, while my great-grandfather spent his evenings on the porch and drank and smoked and was basically ornery to everyone he saw. But I never knew that man. He stopped smoking when great-grandma died, before I was born, and his drinking became more hobby than habit. One time he took me out to the woods that picket our fields, cow corn that year, and showed me—just me—where to scatter his ashes, on the spot where he'd first made love to great-grandma. I promised not to tell anybody that it was before they were married.

How many promises did I make to that man? Broken only now, now that he is gone, when I need him most.

My great-grandfather died during a robbery at the Brantford Bank of Montreal. Two men with guns came into the bank and made everyone lie down. While one of them emptied the tills the other selected a young woman from those on the ground and started to drag her around the front counter. She didn't resist; there were at least a dozen other hostages, and both men were frantic and twitchy. Autopsies determined that they were high on crystal opiate. So she didn't do anything that would set them off. She put her hands over her face while her skirt rode up her thighs and her hair swept the cold tile floor. My great-grandpa saw what was happening; he stuck his cane between the man's legs and sent him sprawling. The robber leapt to his feet, forgetting the girl, and on the security video, you could actually see their eyes lock, and the robber hesitate, before he shot my great-grandpa in the face.

That was eight months ago. He was ninety-two.

At his funeral, I met the woman he saved and understood immediately why he had to give his life. Her name is Allison, and she offered me her sympathy and thanks. I offered to make her dinner, impropriety be damned. I know the dust of the man in the urn would have approved.

Out of a sense of duty, perhaps, she agreed to that first meal, and after we'd eaten, while there was still light, I took her to the woods to help me sow my great-grandpa's ashes.

Now when she comes out to the farm, it is by her own volition. With time, we have become familiar; she rubs her wrists when she is uncomfortable, and reads more from my silences than I am withholding. But she has someone, and even though we are eternally connected by the memory of a man long put to rest, she seems to move farther away with each visit. There is a vacuum in our intimacy, cold and silent. We will never be together.

These days I am either with her or waiting for her, and I worry that I will not last much longer like this. Last night, as we sat on the porch and looked up at the evening's star-freckled skin, I found myself wanting for a moon.

I thought I might recognize the look on his face. 🍁

**YOU'RE HERE BECAUSE  
YOU LOVE THE ARTS.**



**SO ARE WE.**



**The Alberta  
Foundation  
for the Arts**

**Alberta**  
COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

COMMITTED TO THE DEVELOPMENT OF CULTURE AND THE ARTS

*At first, I just thought the blanket had gotten bunched up. But the lines of the silhouette were too regular, too smooth...*

# A Case of Port

Randy D. Ashburn

*YOU'VE NEVER SEEN THE INSIDE OF A JAIL CELL BEFORE. TV CAN'T do justice to the overwhelming stench of urine and vomit. The walls are a kind of beige-gray found no where in nature. The thermostat is set way too low. And the bars: thick and hard like clubs to beat you in rhythm to the pounding in your head.*

*The doctor told you your new medicine didn't mix with alcohol, but it was just a wine tasting, for Christ's sake. Your wife was the one who really wanted to go anyway. "It'll be fun," she'd said. "Something different."*

*Nobody mentioned that the big bottle with a funnel in it was there so you could spit the stuff out instead of swallowing it. Besides, who the hell gets picked up for DUI coming home from a wine tasting?*

*Just your luck, huh?*

*"You don't look like you belong here either." It's some guy standing alone in another cell. He's wearing a sports coat, and even though it's a God-awful shade of brown, it sets him apart from everyone else in here.*

*You make some snide remark or another—the kind you're famous for.*



*He laughs. "I think at this point I'm supposed to ask the obligatory 'what-a-ya-in-for' question."*

*Why not? There are probably worse ways to spend time in a drunk tank. He's a little disheveled, but at least he doesn't look like you'd catch something just from talking to him. Besides, you probably look like crap yourself.*

*So you tell him your story.*

*He laughs. A lot. You figure you'd better get used to that reaction.*

*Determined to find just as much amusement in his misfortune, you ask what brings him here.*

*He opens his mouth like he's about to say something, then snaps it shut again. He stares hard, probably sizing you up the same way you did him.*

*"Funny thing is, it all started with wine for me, too..."*

"YOU SPENT *HOW MUCH* ON A BOTTLE OF WINE?" MELONIE GAVE ME *THAT LOOK*—the one any husband, even those who've only been married for a year, recognizes as Big Trouble.

"Not just *a bottle*; a whole case."

"And that's supposed to make it okay?"

I tried to put my hand on her shoulder but she backed away. "The man at the wine shop said it was a bargain."

She shook her head at the ceiling and rubbed her swollen belly. She was about to start her third trimester, and was getting really huge.

"But it's a tradition. Over in England you buy a case of port wine for the baby, and when he turns twenty-one you have a big party and drink it all."

Melonie lowered herself gingerly into the threadbare recliner. "Since when are you English, Kevin?"

"I thought that being an English professor was close enough."

That got a smile out of her—almost a laugh.

I got down on my knees and took her hand. "If it makes you feel any better, think of it as an investment. We'll drink just one and sell the rest."

She leaned her head on my shoulder and sighed. "You expect me to believe *that* was going through your head when you pulled this stunt?"

"No. I did it because I'm a hopeless romantic."

"Yeah, Mom always said you were hopeless, all right."

We both laughed then.

"Well, why don't you show me this great 'investment' of ours?"

I dragged the heavy wooden box over to her chair. It smelled of briny oak—proof of its pilgrimage from Portugal, I suppose.

After a couple of pretty comical attempts, I managed to pry the lid off

and pick up one of the dark, smoky bottles. It felt heavy, the way anything does when it costs a lot of money.

Melonie reached into the crate with a smirk on her face. "So, how much did he say these'll be worth in—"

She screamed.

Her feet flailed at the crate, and she scrambled as far up into the chair as her bloated body would allow, cradling a limp hand to her chest. I kept looking back and forth from Melonie to the wine, trying to understand why she wouldn't stop shrieking.

I only caught a glimpse of its tail, that first time. Slick and shiny, with garish stripes of red and yellow and black. It slithered over the edge of the crate, and shot off towards the kitchen.

Melonie was white as a funeral pall, and shook wildly as she clutched her belly. Her breath came in short, frightening little bursts.

I had to repeat myself three times before the 911 operator understood me. When she finally got the gist of it, my mouth went on autopilot, reciting our address as a thousand questions raced through my head. How the hell had a snake gotten into the crate? Was it poisonous? How could two tiny fangs make a wound big enough to gush so much blood?

I FOLLOWED THE PARAMEDICS AS THEY WHISKED MELONIE INTO THE ER, BUT FROZE as soon as we hit the flurry of people inside. Professional people. People Who Knew What They Were Doing.

I just stood there blinking as a blur of white jackets fluttered in the cold, antiseptic air and swallowed her whole.

In the ambulance, Melonie's arm had become a purple balloon below the tourniquet they strapped tight around her bicep. But the greenish tint to her puffy cheeks showed that the venom was eating its way through her nonetheless.

A man was shaking me. I guess he was a doctor, but he looked so much like that guy on the toilet paper commercials that I think I actually giggled.

"...got to tell us what happened." Each word was spoken slowly and distinctly, like separate sentences. Sentences with exclamation points.

I must've answered his question, because he began shouting at the Professional People dancing around my wife. "Damn! Sounds like a coral snake. We need anti-toxin, stat!"

Coral snake? Faulkner wrote about those. They lived down south, not up here. Certainly not in Portugal.

"Mr. Faye!" He was shaking me again. "When is she due?"

"September twenty-third." My eyes wandered. "It's a boy. We're going

to name him Ryan..."

But he had already gone to the other Professional People. They huddled together and spoke in hushed tones while Melonie moaned at the tubes piercing her arm. Now and then they glanced at me. Finally, one of them waved his hand and I shuffled over.

Dr. Toilet Paper rubbed his chin. "If your wife doesn't get an antidote for the poison immediately, she'll die." He cleared his throat. "But... the odds are very good that the serum will cause her to lose the baby."

"No!" Melonie's eyes gleamed bright and aware through tiny slits. "You can't kill my baby!"

"Ma'am, please. Just lie back..."

She looked dead at me. "Don't let them kill our son. Please, Kevin. *You can't let anything take our baby away.*"

I had never heard her beg before.

I stared hard at the doctor's stethoscope. "Is there any way... I mean, could you maybe take him out first?"

They glanced at each other. One mumbled, "It *might* be developed enough to survive."

The youngest one shook her head. "No way."

"Besides," someone else said, "the delay would kill her."

Melonie's voice was hoarse but clear. "I won't take *anything* unless you save my child first."

"Ma'am, you're in shock—"

I gaped at my shoes. "Do what she says."

"Sir, she's in no condition..."

I looked up. Through my tears, his face was little more than a brown blob floating in the whiteness. "Do what she says!"

Dr. Toilet Paper exhaled sharply. "We don't have time to argue. Have surgery prep for an emergency cesarean."

The young woman threw her hands into the air and stomped away.

Melonie smiled. I leaned close and brushed my hand over her face. Her skin felt like a newspaper that had sat out too long in a November drizzle. "You'll be fine."

She tried to laugh. "You never could lie worth a damn."

Gleaming metal doors swung shut as they wheeled her away.

The next Wednesday was supposed to be dark and stormy. At least, that's what I had imagined. Too many gothic novels, I guess.

No, it was actually a gorgeous day when they lowered Melonie into a hole in the ground and tossed shovel after shovel of dirt on top of her.

■

"IT'S JUST THAT I KNOW HOW MUCH OF A BURDEN A NEW BABY CAN BE, KEVIN, that's all." My mother-in-law was shouting so that I could hear her over Ryan's wails.

I cradled him to my chest, swaying to Bach's *Cello Suites* and hoping that tonight I could get him to sleep for two hours straight. Even just one might cool the burning in my eyes, quiet the buzzing in my head.

"I appreciate the offer, Mother Beatrice—there, there, Sweetie, Daddy's here—but we're fine."

Her patrician lips drew into a tight little circle. "Grandmama knows best, dear. A colicky infant can be a strain upon anyone, especially..."

I stopped pacing. "Especially on someone who's recovering from a 'nervous breakdown'?"

She clucked her tongue and shook her head.

"Well, let's see: My wife had just died; every exterminator in town had been through the house twice and couldn't find any sign of the snake; and for two months I didn't know from one day to the next whether my prematurely born son was going to live." I glared at her. "I'd have been insane if I *hadn't* needed a week in the hospital after all that!"

"We were *all* wounded by my Melonie's passing. You have no idea how hard it is for a mother to lose her child. But we must be strong, dear, if for no other reason than my precious little Ryan's sake."

I collapsed onto the couch. Ryan leaned his head back, closed his eyes, and opened his tiny mouth as wide as it would go in an ear-splitting scream.

I was too tired to fight when Mother Beatrice took him from me. Her wrinkled face contorted with cooing noises ridiculously out of place from her stern demeanor. And Ryan began to quiet down.

I hated her.

I hated her for the way she so easily succeeded where I had failed. I hated her for being the closest thing I had to family within two thousand miles, and the only person I could turn to for help with the baby. But most of all, I hated her for the way she so obviously loved Ryan.

It would have been easy to dismiss her as the bitter old woman who'd all but disinherited her daughter for marrying someone with "no prospects outside of academia," but I had no right to deprive Ryan of someone who truly cared for him.

"You see, dear, this is exactly what I meant. A baby needs a woman's touch." His color faded from red to pink.

I handed her his bottle, and, of course, he began sucking contentedly.

She rocked him gently. "Besides, it's not as if you couldn't visit when-



ever you pleased.”

“I refuse to ‘visit’ my own son.”

Either I’d spoken too softly, or she didn’t want to hear.

“Whatever do you plan to do once your sabbatical has ended? Put my little Ryan into *day care*?” She said the words like an obscenity. “Why, just this morning I read that the county is investigating those places because of an epidemic of SIDS or some such...”

“It’s impossible to have an ‘epidemic’ of Sudden Infant Death Syndrome. That’s just the diagnosis doctors use when they don’t know the real reason why a baby died. I should know—it happened to my little brother.”

She raised her eyebrows and tilted her head back. “One needn’t get upset, dear. I was merely repeating what was in the newspaper.”

Milk rolled down Ryan’s chin as he slept blissfully in Mother Beatrice’s arms. His tiny snores sang in harmony with the Bach piece on the stereo. And his face. So peaceful. So beautiful.

So much like his mother’s.

“We really ought to put him in his crib.” Sure, I’d said it mater-of-factly, but I’d meant for it to hurt her—to take him from her the way she wanted to take him from me.

Mother Beatrice rose without a word.

Ryan slept in the room that used to be my library, just like Melonie had planned. A crib sat where my writing desk used to be. Beatrice Potter and A. A. Milne perched on the shelves, while James Joyce and Herman Melville slunk away to dark and dusty cardboard boxes. But I never had figured out how to replace the paneling with the cartoon splattered wallpaper we’d bought last spring.

She laid him in his bed, kissed her index finger and touched it tenderly to his forehead.

Back in the living room she carefully dusted her jacket before putting it on, then paused at the front door and stared at me like some Dickensian villainess.

“It is important that we keep uppermost in our minds what is best for my little Ryan. One mustn’t allow selfishness to cloud the issue.”

And then she was gone.

I wanted to scream for hours, like Ryan had. But I couldn’t. I couldn’t even get properly mad at her. I was too afraid that she might be right.

My days and nights were consumed by the insatiable demands of my tiny son. But the truth is, *I needed his need*. In those fleeting moments when he slept peacefully, the house ached in silence and I had nothing to keep me company but melancholy ghosts.

I went to his room to look at him one last time before shuffling off to bed.

Gray light seeped around the curtains, crowding the room with shadows. Ryan was on his back, tossing just a bit, as if disturbed by whatever passes for nightmares in a four-month-old's mind. I'm ashamed to admit that the first thing that ran through my head was, "Please God, don't let him wake up."

Then I saw it for the second time.

Something was lying across Ryan's small body. At first, I just thought the blanket had gotten bunched up. But the lines of the silhouette were too regular, too smooth.

Too much like a snake.

The serpent was undulating on top of my baby, its mouth clamped to his, almost as if it were *sucking* in an obscene parody of a nursing child. Near the front of the snake, pulsing on Ryan's tiny chest, there was a lump like some not-yet-digested rat struggling for freedom.

*Please, Kevin. You can't let anything take our baby away.*

I clutched the cool, slick thing and yanked it off my son. It hissed and writhed in my hand as I held it at arm's length, wondering what the hell I was supposed to do next.

Then a passing car lit up the room, and I finally got a good look at it.

The stripped body was just as I remembered—a coral snake like the doctor had said. But sprouting from my clenched fist was a *woman's head*. It was small, but you could clearly see her high cheekbones, long straight nose, and violently red lips, all framed by slimy black hair. Its tiny fangs gnashed the air.

As the car's light faded, I screamed and threw the thing against the wall as hard as I could. There was a wet thump, followed by a low, almost moaning hiss.

I snatched Ryan from his crib and ran. He was trying to cry, but the frail sobs were choked off by gasps for air. As I raced out of the house, I saw that his skin was an ugly blue.

RYAN WAS PINK AGAIN BY THE NEXT MORNING. THE HOSPITAL GAVE HIM BACK to me, along with a handful of useless pamphlets advising that I not let him sleep on his stomach or put stuffed animals in his crib. I threw them in the trash and stopped by the house just long enough to grab a few things. There was no way that I was ever going to let that creature near my son again.

At least, that's what I'd planned.

I couldn't have been inside for more than a minute, but when I came

back out a sheriff's cruiser was parked behind our Chevy. Ryan was crying in his carseat, and the deputy stood next to him, his face as stiff as his starched gray uniform.

He brushed thick fingers along his buzz-cut hair and marched towards me. "You know, most people crack the window a little even when they leave a *dog* all alone."

He handed me a piece of paper and got back into the cruiser without another word. It was a summons to be in the courthouse at one o'clock for an emergency custody hearing.

This latest trip to the hospital had apparently been more than poor Mother Beatrice could take. According to that piece of paper, I was an "unfit parent" with a "history of mental illness" who was "endangering the health and well-being" of her grandson.

The lawyer I picked out of the Yellow Pages kept the judge from taking Ryan away that afternoon, but another hearing was scheduled in two weeks to decide his "permanent status." The lawyer said that it wouldn't look good to the judge if I just abandoned our house for no reason. I didn't bother to ask what the judge would think if I told her about snakes with human heads.

So we went back home.

Ryan smiled and gurgled as I carried him from one all too quiet room to the next, looking for some way to defend him. We didn't own a gun, of course, but there wasn't even a baseball bat or golf club around.

The best that I could find was an old set of knives we'd gotten as a door prize somewhere. The cleaver looked the most deadly. I smiled as I imagined it slicing off that obscene little head, then mashing it into an unrecognizable smear under my heel.

I sat on the floor of Ryan's room, with my back wedged into a corner. The baby was in my lap, looking up at me with sleepy eyes. I kept glancing back and forth from him to the rest of the room, nervously scanning for any movement and occasionally touching the cleaver just to make sure it was still beside me.

And I also did the only thing I was ever any good at: I read. Collections of folklore, mythological encyclopedias, even horror anthologies. I skimmed through them all, trying to figure out what was slithering behind our baseboards.

One name kept squeezing my stomach with icy fingers. *Lamia*.

She was one of the dozens of lovers of the Greek god Zeus. When his vengeful wife found out about her, she killed all of Lamia and Zeus's children and turned her into a human-headed snake with an appetite for newborns. Over the centuries, the myth evolved from a single creature

named Lamia to a whole baby-hungry race of lamias.

Funny thing is, you can find very similar stories all over the world; from the *ciuateleo* of the Aztecs to the *langsuyar* of the Malayan Peninsula. All of them women who turned into monsters either because they murdered their own children or died in childbirth. Even the vineyards of Portugal, where that damned case of wine came from, had something called a *bruxsa* that feasts on infants.

It was just after I came across that last name that Ryan drew his little knees up towards his chest and began to cry. It was that aching, empty sob that I'd come to recognize as hunger.

I dug through the piles of diapers and toys that surrounded us like a fortress wall, searching for a bottle. They were all empty, their insides crusted yellow-white with sour formula.

His wails grew louder as I stroked his fragile brow. "Sweetheart, we need to stay here where it's safe."

Tiny tears pooled in his eyes.

I prayed that he'd go back to sleep. If only he could wait until daylight before we left his room. I pretended that it was only gas and rocked him, changed him, sang to him. But, of course, none of this worked. Finally, when his cries seemed to take on an accusatory tone, I knew that I couldn't put it off any longer.

We went down to the kitchen.

There weren't any bottles in the refrigerator either, so I put a kettle of water on the stove. I held Ryan in my arms, trying to keep him far enough away not to be burned, but close enough to be safe from ... other things.

The hour-long minutes plodded by as I paced in front of the stove. My head throbbed in time with Ryan's famished wails as my gaze jerked nervously from one corner to another. Every light in the house was on, but there were still far too many shadows. And every one of them seemed to writhe if I stared at it long enough.

"Kevin."

The whisper was so quiet that I felt it inside of me more than heard it.

"Please, Kevin."

I held my breath. Even Ryan was silent as steam began to hiss softly from the kettle.

"You promised not to let *anything* take our baby away."

I tried to say her name, but it stuck in my dust-dry throat.

"You were supposed to take care of him, Kevin. You were supposed to do all those things that I never got a chance to do."

My knees turned into cold, clumpy oatmeal. "I'm...doing...my..."



best... ”

“Are you?” The kettle whistled harshly. “Look at my son. He’s exhausted, starving, afraid.”

I backed into the stove. Its heat stung my hip.

“Can’t you do anything right without me, Kevin? Anything?”

I closed my eyes and shook my head. When I opened them again the lamia was less than a foot away on the countertop, slithering towards us through a basket of apples Mother Beatrice had left.

It opened its grotesque little mouth and whispered my name again. “You should have been the one to die instead of me.”

I don’t remember grabbing the kettle, but I vividly recall the smell of boiling water on linoleum. The splash scalded my back as I turned away to shield Ryan. My hand scrambled desperately for the cleaver as my eyes scanned the steaming flood on the countertop.

But the lamia wasn’t there.

“Look at you!”

At the sound of the new voice a warm wetness spread down my leg.

A barking half-cough, half-laugh echoed off the kitchen tiles. “Still pissin’ your pants, huh, kid?”

Her Arkansas drawl was low and gravelly, just like I remembered. I swear I could even smell those damned menthol cigarettes again.

The cleaver trembled above my head as I clutched Ryan tightly. “You’re not my mother.”

“Don’t I wish!” The cough-laugh again. “Don’t I just wish.”

I whirled around trying to find the thing, but the scratchy voice seemed to come from everywhere and nowhere.

“You good for nothin’ little faggot.”

I squeezed the cleaver’s handle until my knuckles faded white.

“Not man enough to take care of your brat...”

“Shut up.”

“...not man enough to take care of your wife.”

“Shut up!”

“I should’ve smothered you in the cradle when I had the chance.”

*“Shut up, Mother!”*

The doll-like head swayed mockingly from the serpent draped over the ceiling fan. Its black, soulless eyes burrowed into me while its little snake tongue lapped the air, drinking in my fear and humiliation.

I think I might have gone a little insane right then. The details blur together in my memory.

I remember the way my left arm ached from Ryan’s weight as my right arm swung the cleaver again and again.

I remember the hissing laughter drowning out my screams and Ryan's.

I remember the dull blade clanking against one thing after another, always just missing the lamia as we raced around the room.

But most of all, I remember the stab of guilt that accompanied the briny oak smell when it darted back into the case of port.

The next thing I knew, the lid was up, the cleaver swooped down, and its flimsy blade shattered, twirling end over end through space, just missing Ryan's face.

"Kevin, dear."

I whirled, panting at the thing's newest voice drifting down the dark hallway from a distance.

"I've come for my little Ryan."

I looked for some new weapon.

"It's time we end this nonsense with the courts and the lawyers."

Somehow, one of the heavy bottles of port found its way into my trembling hand.

"Dear, we both realize that it's for the best if my little Ryan comes to stay with his grandmama." It was close now, almost back into the kitchen.

I stood up. Ryan began to cry yet again.

"Must you always make my poor child weep?"

I darted around the corner and brought the bottle down as hard as I could. It exploded in a shower of thick glass and sweet red wine.

I was bathed in it. *Wine and blood.*

Ryan was bathed in it. *Blood and wine.*

And lying on the floor, a dark shard of glass sticking through her left eye, Mother Beatrice's lifeless body was bathed in it, too.

It was about then that I realized it no longer mattered what the judge would think if I abandoned our home.

I threw Ryan into his carseat and mashed the accelerator to the floor, determined to get as far away from that nightmare as possible. But my driving must have been a little ... erratic. A policeman stopped me before I'd gotten three blocks. Once he saw all the blood, he brought me here.

THE GUY FINISHES HIS STORY AND JUST STANDS THERE LIKE HE EXPECTS YOU TO DO something. What the hell are you supposed to say after a performance like that, anyway?

Luckily, you don't have to worry about it for long. Your wife makes bail, and the cops figure you've dried out enough to go home.

One of them hands you a piece of paper with the unsettling words "State of Ohio versus" above your name, and ushers you out of the hold-

ing area. You're careful not to look in the direction of the guy standing all alone in the other cell.

You grab one of those extra-caffeine sodas and use it to wash down four aspirins, hoping that'll kill the little guy who's still doing a drum solo inside your head.

The sun's just coming up over the hills, but for some reason the parking lot's full of people. Reporters and cops, mostly. A small knot of soccer moms stand off to one side, signs leaning against their minivans with *FRY HIM* written in large colorful letters.

When it finally registers on your ego that this has nothing to do with you, you ask your wife what's going on.

She looks at you like you just stepped off the boat from Siberia. "Some professor over at the college murdered his mother-in-law. They say his wife got bit by a snake and died because the son of a bitch wouldn't let the doctors help her. Thank God they saved the baby, though. No telling what that lunatic would've done to him."

You climb into the car without saying a word. Your mouth is as dry as sand, and you can't seem to swallow.

She shakes her head. "How're you supposed to raise a family these days? Nowhere is safe anymore." The car door slams, and the little drummer inside your head goes into a riff from a heavy metal version of a calypso tune.

She slides behind the wheel and tugs at the seat belt. "Crap! I'm getting as big as a cow." You stare at her belly, just now starting to swell with the child growing inside of her.

And you wonder. ♣

*Up until then, I thought my inheriting  
the dragon was automatic. Like  
Saturdays coming after Fridays. Or like  
Grandfather loving me...*

# Dragon's Dust

A.B. Goelman

I REMEMBER WHEN MY GRANDFATHER STOPPED LOVING ME. I must have been about ten, because it was the same year my father died. Was killed. So you'd think my grandfather could have tried a little harder to be understanding. I'm not blaming him for everything that came after, but still. He could have tried a little harder.

It was one of those rare February days with which Vancouver is occasionally blessed—the rains clear and the mountains reappear for the first time in months, looking close enough to touch. No one could help feeling a little happy on these days, and, walking next to my grandfather, I was no exception. Even in bad weather, I loved accompanying him on his afternoon walks—it was like escorting a king through Chinatown. He knew everyone, and of course, everyone knew him—the only non-Khat-sahl dragon master there was. Or is.

At the time, I thought Grandpa was the biggest hero in Vancouver. Possibly the biggest hero in the whole world. In retrospect, with the third Dragon War barely over, I suppose the Chinese neighborhood was



the only place in Vancouver where Grandpa wasn't reviled as a traitor. It took the white people of Vancouver some time to accept the fact that they were still part of the Union of First Nations, that the mountains just across the Burrard Inlet remained definitively off limits to them. As far as they were concerned Grandpa was just as bad as his grandfather—the man they blamed for the very existence of the UFN. If his striking railroad workers hadn't taken refuge with the Khatsahl, the Indians might never have banned the white man from their nation.

Which is all bullshit. If it hadn't been him, it would have been something else.

Grandpa and I took a particularly long walk that day. Down Kuang Su Street, past its Chinese groceries and liquor stores. We walked past the cafés on Victory Drive full of American draft dodgers plotting the revolution over coffee and marijuana. We kept walking towards downtown until we started to pass drug dealers and their whores, strung out on the pavement waiting for rush hour business. Grandpa didn't like me to see them, so we turned onto one of the side streets, and ended up sitting on a park bench behind a Chinese community center.

The dragons were out in force over the mountains, and I pointed at their distant silhouettes circling the snow-covered peaks. "Which one is ours, Grandpa?"

Grandpa brushed his fingers over his dragonpearl's surface. He wore the fist-sized sphere mounted upon a long woven necklace that left it resting upon his chest. The dragonpearl was the milky color of a pearl, but with a flickering black form inside it. Even then, he wouldn't let me touch it. These days, of course, he barely lets me look at it.

After a while he answered, "None of them. My water brother is in the Gulf islands, swimming with the orcas."

"Could you make him come here if you wanted to?"

He frowned slightly. "If I had to, perhaps. If he thought it was important."

"If I had the dragonpearl, he wouldn't have the choice." I looked up at the clear blue sky. "He'd be here right now."

My grandfather looked at me expressionlessly and said nothing.

I showed him my fist. "If he disobeyed me, pff. His pearl would be dust."

My grandfather slowly levered himself to a standing position. Without a word he began walking home, leaving his orphaned grandson to trail behind him as best he could.

Despite his age, he walked fast and I had to jog to catch up to him. "What?" I said, conscious that I had displeased my idol.

He didn't look at me, but after a moment he said, "That's no way to talk about my brother."

"Okay," I said. But he still didn't look at me. "I said okay, Grandpa. I'm sorry."

We walked the rest of the way home in silence. I was furious and frightened. For the first time, I became dimly aware that Grandpa might not approve of my plans for Hsi Wang Mu. Up until then, I thought my inheriting the dragon was automatic. Like Saturdays coming after Friday. Or like Grandpa loving me.

TWENTY YEARS LATER, I'M THINKING ABOUT THAT AFTERNOON WALK WHEN I OPEN up the lecture for questions. An attractive female student sitting in the front row of the amphitheater immediately raises her hand. "Dr. Lai, how does it feel to actually be near to a dragon?"

*Like I know.* I force a smile, although, even now, the charade makes me taste bile. "It's hard to put into words." From the podium I can see that she's holding her pencil so tightly her knuckles are white. I check my wrist manager for her name. "It's ineffable, Vanessa. Like nothing you've ever dreamed."

Before I can call on the next person, she quickly calls out, "Did your anger over your father's death make it difficult to form a relationship with your dragon?"

I let my eyes get wide and sincere. "You have to understand that dragons don't understand death in the same way as we do. My father's death was an accident." My grandfather must have told me that hundreds of time. Kindly at first, then angrily. Never a single word of anger towards his water brother, just towards his obstinate, unforgiving grandson. I paste my smile back on and say, "Okay, enough personal questions. Any more questions about today's lecture?"

After class, she approaches me. She's wearing a white t-shirt with a picture of a dragon imprinted across the chest. "Can I talk to you, Dr. Lai?"

"Apparently," I glance at my watch.

When I say nothing else, she laughs hesitantly. "I'm a big admirer of your work."

"And I'm a big admirer of your t-shirt," I say, admiring her firm high breasts beneath the dragon emblem.

Her laugh is even more hesitant now. "I wanted to talk to you about sitting on my dissertation committee."

I begin to walk out of the classroom leaving her to walk after me. "Make an appointment with my secretary. What's your dissertation topic?"

"I'm hoping to study the way that dragons fundamentally challenge

the western empiricist paradigm. I want to particularly focus on their psychology.”

I half-stifle a yawn. Another student who wants to write about how dragons are magic—about how their existence defies all explanation. Climbing the stairs, I pause and put my hand on her shoulder, then point out the window. “How are you going to write about the psychology of a black speck?” We’re facing south on a cloudy day, so the visibility is nil, but she’ll get the point. They always do.

Her fair face flushes. “Well, I was hoping that—”

“You wanted me to let you study my dragon?” I don’t give her time to answer, allow my voice to rise. “Do you have any idea how many requests I get every day for this sort of shit? I’m not about to let you—”

Her voice cuts through mine, “No, no. I totally respect that you wouldn’t want to disturb Hsi Wang Mu. Actually, the Khatsahl Council has agreed to let me enter Khatsahl territory for three weeks this summer.” She can’t keep a quiver of excitement out of her voice. I don’t blame her—the first white person the Khatsahls have let in since the détente of the 1970s. My stomach clenches even before she finishes. “I’m planning an ethnography of Khatsahl dragon brothers. I figure that if anyone can give me insight into the dragons, they can.”

Shit. One of the Khatsahl is bound to mention that I’m no water brother. This little bitch is just what I need, with Professor Fielding at Oxford already nipping at my heels. Not that he’s actually called me a fraud. Not publicly. Not yet.

I quickly moderate my tone, force a smile. “Three weeks in Khatsahl territory is the opportunity of a lifetime. I’d be glad to work with you on a research program. There’s lots of work to be done on dragon habitat. Like, the reason that dragons are so reluctant to leave this region.”

“Maybe they just don’t want to,” she says. “In one of your books, you wrote that we can’t explain everything about dragons.”

“No.” A brisk professorial shake of my head. “I wrote that we haven’t explained everything *yet*. There has to be some reason they want to stay—some trace element in the water or something. It’s the only thing that kept the Khatsahl from conquering the continent ages ago.” The words pour out automatically, confidently. I keep my smile pasted on my face as I turn to continue up the stairs. “I look forward to working with you, but I won’t have you wasting your time on dragon psychology. Leave the ethnographies to the sociologists.”

Vanessa remains on the stairs below me. Her voice holds no sign of resignation. “Thanks for your time, Dr. Lai. I guess I’ll just have to find a different second reader.”

I force myself to turn slowly and raise my eyebrows as though this is all amusing. "Please. If you insist on pursuing this topic, of course I'd be delighted to work with you. I just thought I'd warn you in advance." At least I'll maintain some control over her findings. More likely, I'll be the first to know when she exposes me as a liar.

She nods, wrinkles her forehead. "Great. I look forward to working with you."

I nod back to her, and try convincing myself that her ironic tone is purely my imagination. Back in my office, I stare at the phone for half an hour before picking it up. Before dialing the contact number I've had in my wallet for five years.

THAT EVENING, TWO MEN ARE WAITING FOR ME IN FRONT OF MY HOUSE. A LARGE white man wearing sunglasses and a Chinese man, no doubt to make me comfortable. "Dr. Lai," the Chinese man says. "I'm James Chen—US Department of Defense. I spoke to you earlier today on the phone."

"Yeah." I shake his hand. "I'm surprised they let you over the border so quickly."

The white man chuckles and holds out his hand. He has the slight rotundity of a former athlete gone to fat. "Bob Fitzgerald. Let's just say we can teach your Indian friends a few lessons about covert operations." When I ignore his hand, he coughs and looks up at the sky. "Yeah, well. Let's take this inside."

I keep my face blank, and unlock my front door, lead them into my study. I put them into the lowslung couch that I keep for guests and slide into my chair behind the desk. Looking down at them, I clear my throat. Best to get it over with quickly. "You contacted me some time ago."

"Of course we did, Dr. Lai." Chen talks with the smooth, practiced manner of a stage magician. "I'm sure you're aware of the current administration's interest in bringing the Union of First Nations into the American free market."

"Yeah. I have some idea." Now that the Americans have decimated their own forests, exhausted their oil reserves, and strip-mined their coal, they're eyeing the Unity like it's a juicy clump of grapes. There's only one thing stopping them from plucking us.

Fitzgerald leans forward. A deep scar, running from just below his left eye to the bottom of his cheek, twists when he smiles. "We believe that if we had a better understanding of the UFN's dragon forces, we could convince y'all of the benefits of free trade." Nothing new here. White men have been itching to get access to a dragon since George Vancouver first sailed around Vancouver Island two centuries ago. And now I'm going to



hand them one on a silver platter.

Fitzgerald finishes, "We're particularly interested in the link between dragons and their masters."

Now that they're here, I can't quite bring myself to do it. Instead, I stall for time. "That much I can answer right now." I reach behind me for a copy of my second book, *Brother to Dragons*, and slap it down on my desk. "I posit an extradimensional communication involving super symmetrical particles, or squarks, which allows dragons to maintain contact through their unfertilized eggs." Chen stares back at me blankly, while Fitzgerald continues to smile his small, superior smile. "Let me put it this way. In some extradimensional space, the dragons and their stones are actually part and parcel of the same object."

Fitzgerald shrugs. "That's just bullshit you made up, right?" I open my mouth, but he doesn't give me a chance to interrupt. "Dr. Lai, we have good information indicating you haven't seen a dragon up close since you were ten. And we both know the real chances of your grandfather giving you his dragonpearl before he dies." He shows me his thumb and forefinger linked in a circle. "Zero."

I point to the door. My face feels hot. "Get the fuck out of here. I'm sorry I wasted my time."

Fitzgerald stands, but Chen holds up his hands. "Whoa. Let's all calm down. Bob didn't mean any offense, Dr. Lai. We're here because we believe you know more about dragons than any other non-Khatsahl in the world." Tactfully, he doesn't mention my grandfather. "We want to hear what you have to say."

"It's true that I haven't seen a dragon for some time," I say. "But I know who has. In fact I know a whole bunch of people who have."

LATER THAT AFTERNOON, I DRIVE OUT TO THE NURSING HOME. I FIND THE OLD MAN outside in the Japanese garden, looking over the goldfish pond. There's a gold fish the size of my arm swimming in the water a few feet from his bench, seemingly drawn by the shimmering dragonpearl.

My grandfather taunts me with his smile. "Chun Li," he says. "What a pleasant surprise."

"I just want you to know, Grandpa," I say. "I'm about to be exposed as a fraud because you wouldn't let me see the dragon."

His welcoming smile disappears, and I feel a twinge of guilt. Which is ridiculous when you think about how many times he's refused me—rejected me—over the years. "I'm sorry," he finally says, and turns back to look at the goldfish.

"What could I do to convince you?"

"To show you my water brother? Nothing. Just stay here for a while. Sometimes he visits."

I've waited with my grandfather before for weeks. The dragon comes when I'm asleep, when I go to class, when I go shopping. If the same dragon hadn't destroyed U.S. B-52s I would doubt its existence. "How long, Grandpa?"

"As long as it takes," he says, as helpful as a fortune cookie.

I try and fail not to ask the next question. "Why won't you just give me the stone, like you gave it to dad? Why not? What if you..."

"If I die before you're ready for the stone, the stone will disintegrate," he says. He takes my hand in his own hands, wrinkled and dry as a used paper glove. "Chun Li. If a person doesn't want to make a new friend, a dragonpearl is worse than useless. It's dangerous."

The older he gets, the more Grandpa reminds me of those hippies who talk about animals in a hushed voice, as though being mute and dumb is a testimony to the animal's wisdom. Heaven forbid the Khatsahl First Nation allow western scientists to study their beloved water brothers.

He stands to walk me back out to my car, holding my arm as we walk. Not that he has to. Over ninety, and still he doesn't need a cane. But he likes touching me. He kisses my cheek when we get to my car, and for a moment I think of telling him about my deal with the Americans. But he'd just turn me in. I hug him and drive away.

A FEW WEEKS PASS BEFORE CHEN CALLS ME AT MY OFFICE. I MEET THEM IN AN abandoned warehouse in the old railroad yards. I have to park my car in a nearby city works parking lot and walk half a mile through dead fields of corrugated metal roofs and old machinery to get to the meeting place.

Fitzgerald is standing outside the doors of a gray steel warehouse smoking, one hand thrust deep into the outside pocket of his Gore-Tex jacket.

"Very subtle," I say.

He doesn't take his hand out of his pocket. "'Bout time you got here. Your benefactor awaits you."

I step through the wide doorway, and I'm immediately struck with the stench of vomit. The space is surprisingly bare—a dusty concrete floor lit only by the gray light filtering through the window. Chen is sitting next to a thin camp mattress upon which a Khatsahl man lies, curled up inside an old sleeping bag. The Khatsahl's hair is ratty, his beard grown in a thin, straggly pattern. He looks up at me through bleary eyes. "Hey, is this the guy with the whiskey?"

I had suggested that the Americans use heroin, but apparently they had some drug which made for an instant alcoholic. Still, they must have forced the first few drinks down his throat with a funnel. No Khatsahl would touch alcohol of his own volition.

"I think it might be." Chen leaps up and takes me by the arm, slips a fifth of whiskey into my hand. He whispers to me. "We've had him doped up since we took him. He's as ready now as he'll ever be."

I walk towards the Khatsahl, thinking of Vanessa and wondering what she would do to get access to a real dragon. "Hello," I say, extending the whiskey bottle to him.

He reaches for the bottle, and I almost let him take it. Old reflexes die hard. We had lots of Khatsahl visitors around the house when I was growing up, and Grandpa expected me to be a good host. I remember meeting young kids with dragonpearls as big as their fists, bigger sometimes. I would pour them green tea as I asked about their precious water brothers in appropriately awed tones.

I'm thinking of those kids when I yank the bottle away from his fingers. The Khatsahl leaves his hand outstretched and slurs, "Come on, man." His hands are big, half again the size of mine. I suspect he'd be as tall as Fitzgerald if he was standing, but huddled in the sleeping bag he looks very small.

I open the fifth and take a long sip. Shit. At least they could have bought him a decent bottle. I make myself swallow. The Khatsahl stares at my lips glistening with alcohol and suddenly sits up and vomits, a loud gasping retch. He must have been vomiting all day, as nothing comes out but a greenish drool, dribbling down his chin.

Chen hands him a handkerchief and pats his back. "You're almost there, buddy. You just need to give him something for the booze."

As the Khatsahl wipes his face, the sleeping bag slips from his chest, exposing his dragonpearl. It is darker and smaller than that of my grandfather and I distantly wonder if his pearl's size corresponds to that of his dragon. One more question I'll finally be in a position to answer.

I think to myself that I could, that I should, just walk away. Instead I begin to very slowly pour the whisky, drop by drop, onto the cement floor in front of the Khatsahl. The Khatsahl watches the whiskey and moans, low in his chest.

I'm so smart it makes me sick. It's impossible to get close to the dragons without the Khatsahl noticing, but they're far less vigilant about their dragon masters, no doubt figuring that a dragon will rescue any kidnapped master by itself. I guessed that a dragon wouldn't be so good at recognizing a drugged master. And it seems I was right.

Chen taps the Khatsahl's dragonpearl and whispers something about how I'm an adopted Khatsahl. It's true. When my great grandfather led the Chinese railroad workers in support of the UFN uprising, he was formally adopted into the tribe. Nonetheless, the Khatsahl covers the stone with his hands and bows his head.

For a moment the only sound is the distant traffic on the Georgia Street Viaduct, and the quiet dripping of whiskey unto the floor. After perhaps a minute, the Khatsahl breaks and holds his hands under the whiskey flow. I allow a few drops to fall before moving the bottle.

He licks his palm. Then, without looking up, he removes the twine upon which the stone dangles from around his neck. He holds it towards me and I immediately stop spilling the whiskey onto the floor. Not that conserving it is doing him any favors, but it seems only fair. "Take it, my brother," he says. "I am no longer worthy of his friendship."

I take the stone and hand him the whiskey. Although I feel absolutely calm, my hands are shaking. The dragonpearl is hard and smooth as a marble, just as I remembered from touching Grandfather's as a little kid. But I immediately sense an additional element. It begins like an itch, like I'm trying to remember something.

And then I simultaneously hear it and see it, a jumbled mix of senses. Warm water, bright orange salmon swimming around me singing to themselves, an overwhelming sense of delight. And a feeling, not-quite-words, of increasing proximity.

*<Growing closer.>*

I leave Chen to tend to the Khatsahl, and I walk back into the cloudy sunlight. Fitzgerald has taken his large handgun out of his pocket, God knows why. A handgun wouldn't bring down a grizzly, let alone an adult dragon.

"He's coming," I tell him.

"Good." For once his smile looks strained, though. Dragons have been the bogey monsters for three generations of United States soldiers.

The dragon's voice moves from wordless to words. *<Greetings, Michael Lai. My fellow Hsi Shing Mu sends greetings to his brother's spawn.>*

The Khatsahl's dragon knows my grandfather's dragon, knows who I am. For some reason that terrifies me. My grandfather will know exactly what happened today even if no one else does.

"Greetings," I say out loud. Now that I'm here, now that I have it, I don't know what to do. I just wait dumbly and experience the flood of images. Water gives way to air, and giant lungs begin to expand. My water brother flies past skyscrapers, playing on the wind tunnels and alleys they create. Little people shriek and take pictures as he flies over them.



Finally, the images slow. Giant wings, covered with a mixture of scales and feathers, beat the air, circling my destination. Below, I see a balding Chinese man wearing a stone that glows like the full moon. There's an indescribable wrenching moment before I recognize my own body.

I force a distinction between dragon and human, find myself on the ground looking up as he—as it lands. On the ground, its large head seems clumsy, precariously balanced atop of its long serpentine body. Some small part of me wishes I had a camera. A decent close-up of a dragon goes for thousands of dollars.

Its huge head swivels towards the warehouse. Fitzgerald is standing in front of the door with his legs planted wide, but the dragon knocks him aside with as little notice as I would swat an insect. From behind I see it push its head inside and sniff the Khatsahl lying half-conscious atop his bedroll. It projects back to me, *<My old brother is sick. You should fix/heal/kill him. Give my stone back to him and I will help.>*

The force of his will is almost overwhelming. I find myself actually considering giving the stone back. I wish my grandfather had given me more advice about controlling a dragon. But I'll figure it out.

The dragon catches my thought. He slides his head out of the warehouse. *<You don't control your water brother.>* I note abstractly that his eyes have nictitating membranes like those of a snake or a frog. The eyes themselves look very much like the dragonpearl, only larger. Smooth off-white surfaces, marred by shifting whorls of color. The whorls seem to have a hypnotic effect, for I find myself staring dumbly at them. Once again, I must struggle to maintain my focus, to separate my identity from that of the dragon.

I've waited for this all my life. I will show him that I am in charge. Show him what my father should have done to save his life. I pick a simple action. Once I force him to do one thing I can force him to do more. *<Put down your head,>* I think. He—it—doesn't move. I put my hand around the dragonpearl and apply just a slight pressure. The stone is softer than I realized, yielding rather than brittle.

The dragon simply looks at me. Its long tail twitches. *<You are no fit water brother.>* And then its presence in my mind is gone.

But the dragonpearl remains. I press harder, say out loud. "Put down your head." No reaction.

"Leave 'im alone, man." The Khatsahl staggers out of the warehouse's dim interior, bottle in his hand. "That's no way to talk to him."

I don't bother responding, but from behind me I hear, "Shut the fuck up." I half turn and I see that the left side of Fitzgerald's face is covered with blood. Still, he's standing, pointing his gun at the Khatsahl. "Hey,

Doctor. Tell big and green that his friend—" He's interrupted by the dragon's tail smashing him into the side of the barn. The Khatsahl takes another swig of the whiskey and belches.

Throughout, the dragon has not taken his eyes from me, nor lowered his head even a bit. I feel my hand getting sweaty on the side of the stone. The stone feels even softer now, and I wonder what substance would soften so rapidly at such a relatively low heat. And how can it be connected to this massive beast? Perhaps it's an infertile egg, sacrificed for the sake of dragon-human symbiosis. I'll never know if I don't master him now.

"Put down your head!" I say again, bringing still more pressure to bear on the stone.

For an instant the dragon is back in my head. I get a visual flash of my grandfather, looking painfully old and frail, weeping on his couch. Strangely, I am struck less by the weeping than by the haze of love that suffuses the scene. I dimly realize I am looking through his dragon's eyes, and a sense of terrible loss fills me. No one will ever look at me that way.

Let me make clear: I have no intention of doing actual injury to the pearl. And the dragon has just recently been in my head, so he has to know that there's no real danger. But he makes a strange keening noise, and opens his mouth wide. He has the flat teeth of an herbivore, each one large enough to crush my head like an egg. Not that he would have to do any crushing. Dragons aren't the most dangerous animal in the world because of their teeth. I see—I think I see—the bright spark, the beginning of a fire deep in his throat.

In that instant of panic, by sheer reflex, my hands come together. The dragonpearl is suddenly nothing but a double handful of powder, the consistency of freshly fallen snow, already blowing out of my grasp.

I stare down at my hands. The dragon's head moves closer to me, and then in an instant it has moved around me and seized the Khatsahl within his mouth, effortlessly lifting him from the ground. As it does this, the dragon's lower body changes from green to sickly off-white. It deposits the Khatsahl at my feet just as its tail begins to crumble, and the color drains from its upper body as well.

The Khatsahl puts his hand to my fist, takes a bit of the powder onto his own hand, and puts it between his lips. I glance down, and I see the Khatsahl's eyes grow clear. He rolls to his feet, landing in a crouch beside the dragon's head, facing away from me. He touches the dragon as its remaining flesh flakes into powder. Then, without a word, he stands and walks away.

I keep my fists clenched and struggle to put the remaining dragon-

pearl powder into my pockets. Behind me I hear footsteps as Chen leaves the warehouse. It begins to drizzle, and I desperately crouch over the dragon's remains, hoping to shield the powder with my body.

Chen bends over Fitzgerald's body. His voice is quiet. "How could you just kill the dragon?" He looks up at me and I'm surprised to see that his cheeks are wet.

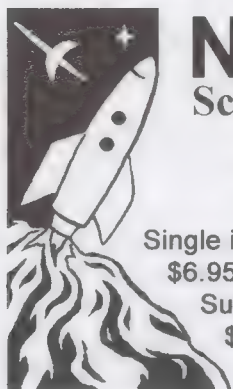
"It killed your partner," I say, using both hands to shove the powder into my pockets. The powder itself is decomposing into dust, almost too fine to pick up. "It would have killed me." I hear the tremble in my voice and hate it. Between the rain and the wind, you'd already hardly know the dragon had been there.

"Come on." Chen's voice is harder than I've heard it, but I don't look up. I scrape up some of the dust-covered mud, put it another pocket. In the distance sirens wail. "Get up, Dr. Lai. You don't want to be here when the police arrive." Chen walks closer to me, pauses. "C'mon. We don't want an international incident."

Another pause. The cool metal gun barrel barely brushes the back of my neck. "Get the fuck up or I'll kill you."

"Go ahead," I say. In my mind's eye, my grandfather is still clutching his heart with both of his hands. In my mind's eye, my grandfather is still weeping over me. "Go ahead."

After a moment the gun pulls away. With some distant corner of my brain, I hear Chen's car start and peel out of the warehouse's parking lot. I could easily make it to my own car, be gone before anyone asks me any questions. Still, I don't move. Instead, I watch the dust become mud and wait for the police to arrive. They seem to take forever. 🍁



# NEO-OPSIS

## Science Fiction Magazine

*Art, Opinion, Fact  
and Fiction*

Single issues

\$6.95 Canadian

Subscriptions

\$24.00 Canadian  
(four Issues)

[www.neo-opsis.ca](http://www.neo-opsis.ca)

4129 Carey Rd

Victoria BC

V8Z 4G5

*"Am I my brother's keeper?" was just lip.  
Cain was mad at God, talked back, told  
God to shove it. So God marked him  
and threw him out...*

# Rainbow Bridge

Steve Mohn

"WATCH ME DROP THIS SUM BITCH."

Anne whispered, "Nell!"

But Nell stood from behind a boulder pile, twenty feet from a Che-mung male, and in one fluid motion nocked and loosed an arrow. The man stepped back as if someone had shoved him. Looked down. Saw the shaft in his chest.

Nell clenched a victorious fist but Anne Whitfield morbidly watched the man kneel, slowly bow, then fall to one side.

"Goddamn it, Nell!"

"Oh, cry over it maybe." Nell Keyhoe nocked a fresh arrow and jogged in.

His skin was brown leather greasy with animal fat. Teeth black at the roots. The body and hide, alive with lice and fleas, stank unbelievably. Nell retrieved her arrow. They took his knife and old rifle, judged his weight and measured his height and girth with a tailor's yellow tape, the inch marks and numbers nearly rubbed away. Nell wrote what they learned or guessed about him in a codex. She flicked her own knife open



and performed a quick autopsy.

"Clogged arteries," Nell said, blowing on the inked page to dry it. The page was cured hen skin, the ink dried chicken blood moistened with spit.

"We'd better bury him," said Anne. Loose stone of all sizes, from boulders to rocks and pebbles, lay scattered, softened by a fur of gray-green lichen. On the treeless, endless rolling hills of lichen and meteoritic stone, Anne saw the distant ruin of a house.

Nell tied the codex and tucked it away. "Let's get the guys."

ONE NIGHT WHEN SAM WAS FIVE, THE CHEMUNG SWEEPED DOWN ON HIS PEOPLE'S camp with torches. Rifle shots cracked like lath on a plank. The heads of leaders they had killed decorated poles to which Sam saw the heads of his own leaders added. Sam was put in a wagon with other children. A fire was made. Children were dragged to the fire, killed, spitted and roasted. Their mothers watched and went mad. Sam was small and skinny and had been passed over so that when the raiders got to him they were sated. Even the half-tame coyotes that followed the Chemung and chased other coyotes that threatened the herds of Chemung deer had been fed. A huge greasy man with one eye, whom Sam took for leader of all the Chemung, told Sam to run and tell everyone about him. This man had called himself Mungo or Mad Mungson or some such. It had been years ago. Sam had told no one about Mad Mungo, who had surely died. The Chemung, on the other hand, were "like dog shit," as his father had said: "All over the place." The Chemung had done quite well.

Over years, Sam had wandered. He had met other leaders, always big loud men who wanted Sam to tell everyone about them. Sam always promised to but never did. His mother had taught Sam to read and write and he had saved some of the books of his tribe—most of their books had fed the fires—so Sam lived by telling stories from *The Bible* or *Nuclear, Biological and Chemical Warfare* or *Mighty Thor Comics*. One story Sam had made up: Bomb and God had fought a great war and Bomb had won—Bomb must have won because he shone most days while God shone only dimly at night, even more dimly in the day and often not at all. His face when full looked bruised.

To explain the sky bridge—chalk-white by day but at night showing rings of gold, brick and pale green, and looking solid enough to cross if only you could find its origins—Sam had other stories.

HIKING OLD 81 TO THE GHOST CITY, CORTLAND, THEN UP ROUTE 41 TO 174, Anne's counting party found Chemung herds within a mile of the

Oneida Lens. North of Stopped Rock, a big Chemung camp, surrounded by a small sea of deer, milled with people. Anne and Nell, and the three men—Wong, Horvat and Steiner—counted sixty large tents, over seven hundred people and many half-tame coyote roaming the camp at will.

Nell, on her belly and gazing down a slope into the camp, said, "They eat so much meat. It's why their arteries clog."

"So they don't live long," Anne said.

Nell said, "They don't know what long is."

"What, are you tired of it?" asked Anne.

"Of living long?" Nell looked thirty. So did Anne. But between them they had close to five hundred years. Nell said, "I'm sick of jerks like them doing well and getting in our way."

"You kill them for sport," Anne accused.

"I do not kill them for sport. I kill them to warn them off. They'd rape us half to death and roast us over a dung fire. You know they would."

Anne knew they would. "In the long run—"

Nell said, "We are the long run."

THE FIRST THING SAM JUDGED WHEN HE MET A NEW TRIBE WAS HOW HUNGRY they looked. When he came to the Ithaca camp to meet their leaders and offer stories for food, he felt sure they would not eat him. Hens pecked and scratched within the hilltop encampment. Clearly, the Ithaca ate hens and did not need his stringy hide. Sam had a mortal fear of being eaten. Often he thought of his hours in the wagon of doomed children, some crying for their mothers, others mute with fear, but all naked, colored orange by the flames. One boy had kept climbing out of the wagon, bent-backed, repeating his mother's name. Sam had seen her killed and so had this boy, her son. The men guarding the wagon would let him get almost out then one man would clout him back in. The boy would wait a moment then try again. A man would clout him back into the wagon and the boy would try again, brainless as a vine, until he was shoved at a cook and dragged off. God's greenish face had gazed down, powerless. All night the raiders had revelled and gorged. Sam huddled in the wagon, not hiding, just seeing out the nightmare, numb to feeling. He had watched God slink across the sky to swell yellow on the horizon, then Bomb had risen to show the hellish scatter of bones and stumbling raiders.

Now Sam was old—he guessed seventy.

"I do not fear death," Sam said that first day to Ben Keyhoe of the Ithaca.

"I know the feeling," said Ben. He was long-limbed, lean, and looked

made of knobby saplings. His beard hung coarse and black.

Sitting in a dirt clearing, Sam stopped sorting his books, wondering what Ben could possibly have meant, then decided to start with *Genesis*. But Ben saw *Mighty Thor* Comics and cried:

“Jesus Minnie—Marvel Comics! I even *read* that one.”

Sam wondered if he had passed this way before. “Read?”

Ben nodded. “I was a kid. I collected ‘em. Jeez...”

Sam sat open-mouthed, then decided this was gibberish. Better to act as if Ben had said nothing. But he told *Mighty Thor* in his own words, improvising while carefully turning brittle pages:

“And Thor threw his uru hammer and held the hammer and flew with it, shaping his mouth to say: ‘By Odin, I must go to Asgard!’ Crossing the rainbow bridge, Thor found Odin, his father, in Valhalla. And Odin was worn with cares. A crack had appeared in the walls, and all the Aesir knew what this portended—Ragnarok is coming! Ragnarok is coming!”

“Ragnarok.” Ben smiled sadly. “Twilight of the gods.” He squinted at the rainbow bridge in one panel, long faded to earth tones.

“Some say Ragnarok is the terrible saviour,” Sam invented. “Others name him leader of the Chemung.”

Ben arched his eyebrows. “Thought they were led by a guy called Madson.”

Sam had no idea who led the Chemung. They had murdered his people so he had avoided them, and they were known by their vast herds of deer, so where there were deer there were Chemung. They were easily avoided. But Madson—so like the name Mad Mungson! An old hatred filled Sam’s chest with vengeful gas. He conceived a plan and smiled toothlessly.

“Are we far from these Chemung, Ben?”

“Not far. We count ‘em now and then, grab some deer.”

UNDER TORN CANVAS, ANNE WHITFIELD SAT AGAINST HER PACK, KNEES UP, A RIFLE in her lap. It was her watch. The hills wore rugs of gray lichen and sedge. Dwarf pine and scrub oak picked out the scar of State 89, one of those designated scenic highways that had not felt car tires in two hundred years.

South, she saw the chalk arch of the planetary ring, like Saturn’s as if seen from the cloud deck, and a white moon streaked with fairly recent ejecta.

The Ithaca had outlived the extinction. Others, like the Chemung, were in their fifth generations. But the Ithaca predated the extinction. Anne remembered tall trees, abundant water, crowds.

A comet worn by sunlight to a cloud of black mountains had pounded the earth and moon for four days. Kinetic energies converted to heat had carbonized jungles, vaporized lakes and threatened a smothering greenhouse.

But as much dust as water had shrouded the planet, and while the water absorbed heat, the dust reflected light, and heat, back into space, then formed the seeds around which raindrops grew. Mud rains gave updrafted algae and lichens back to Earth, revealing an already differentiated ring system spanning the sky. A bridge. With the return of light, life returned.

Anne had taught agronomy at Cornell, had been best friends with Nell Keyhoe, whose husband, Ben, chaired biology. Ben had known all the big people in life-extension. Experimentation had reached a point with test subjects (swine, apes) indicating no doubt. It worked. Talk had circulated privately as to whether the fruits of the research should be open-sourced or handed to federal agencies to oversee. For Ben Keyhoe the choice had been clear. "You don't sell immortality, you *bestow* it. To hell with hand-wringing fools and other economists!" He had been, in those days, a man of vast personality, hard to dislike. With his smile, the very climate improved. And immortality sells itself. Ben and Nell had brought in Anne, then other singletons and childless couples of their circle. Twenty-one had flown to Baltimore and Johns Hopkins for three weeks over the Christmas break, to be injected, inoculated and infused with the nanobiotics whose working parts would outlast the solar system.

Shortly after they had recovered and flown home, that solar system came crashing down.

Jim Wong, curled beside her, hat covering his face, jerked hard in his sleep and warned, "Get under!" then lay still. Anne checked Horvat and Steiner. Both asleep. Hobbled deer, runts no more than waist-high, nibbled lichen that clothed every stone and chunk of concrete with leathery gray-green fuzz.

A gull cried like a hinge. Anne looked up. Gulls worked Chemung bone piles and smelly latrines. The Ithaca prudently buried theirs, blurred other traces.

Nell should have caught up by now, worried Anne Whitfield. Yesterday, Nell had hived off to stalk deer.

"BOMB STOOD ON THE CITIES AND SHONE A BLINDING LIGHT. HE BLEW A WIND that crushed men under their walls. His light made fire of the sky and his wind blew white with ash. Forty days and nights his fire raged. My name doesn't matter but it's Sam. And in those days there was one called



Ragnarok, for he was called this. He knew all the dead and knew what they knew, and—”

“Hold it.”

Sam ceased.

Ben Keyhoe said: “I think you should strike: ‘My name doesn’t matter but it’s Sam.’” Ben scratched in his black beard. “If it doesn’t matter, why say it?”

Air whistling in his nostrils, Sam struck the line.

The room had square walls and corners, part of a hilltop system of ruins. Ben sat at a desk worth a fortune in oak, peering through a black, angular thing he called a microscope. An arrangement of mirrors on the desk caught light through a window and aimed it up the central tube. Ben sat back, removed a glass slide and stood it in a small tray from which he selected another. He slid it into place.

“This is not what I had in mind when I said you could write about me, Sam.” Ben peered through the tube and turned a small gnurled wheel. “I’m flattered that you want to call me Ragnarok, but how can you say I know what the dead know?”

This made Sam angry. Ben Keyhoe had *told* him he knew what the dead knew! It had not made a lot of sense, the way Ben had said it, as if he thought he was older than Sam, which he clearly was not. Ben looked about forty.

“Anyway,” said Ben, “I told you—it was *not* a war.”

Sam set the skins he had written in hen’s blood between two rawhide flaps and placed the book in a satchel that held his *Bible*, his *Nuclear, Biological and Chemical Warfare* (which he had loaned to Ben, who said he could read) and his *Mighty Thor*. He knew Ben was pulling his leg to say the extinction had not been caused by war. It had certainly been a war *and* a war foretold. Odin had seen from a crack in a wall that Ragnarok was coming—possibly through the crack. Sam had told this story for years to people who had no books and could not read at all.

Sam stood on creaky legs and glared at Ben Keyhoe. “You should kill these Chemung. All of them. If you don’t then what am I supposed to write about you? There won’t be nothing to write. You’ll die without issues,” he said with a sweep of his hand, then shrugged and turned toward his room.

Ben peered through his microscope.

NELL KEYHOE. WHERE IS GOD-FORSAKEN NELL?

They had been out twenty-eight days, coming down Seneca Gulch from Great Ontario Marsh, when Anne and the men hobbled the three

deer securely to backtrack. They walked till morning then, exhausted, returned to the hobbled deer, having found no trace of Nell.

Possibly, a more developed tribe had grabbed her to boost a poor birth rate, but the Ithaca had held this area since the extinction and had met no such tribe. Gone too was the codex. They had looked for its remnant—useless to wild men, had wild men taken Nell to ravish and eat. Nor had they found any trace of Nell nor sign of blood.

Though low on water they spent another day searching, going out by twos. Finally, Anne said, “We have to get home.”

Angry, silent and ashamed, they crossed Ovid Ridge then cut through the swamp to slur their tracks. Now, within sight of the Ithaca ruin, Anne wondered how to tell Ben Keyhoe that she had lost his wife.

TO RAISE THEIR HENS, THE ITHACA—THIRTY-SEVEN MEN, FORTY WOMEN, THIRTEEN children—ground mushrooms, bugs, worms, eggshells and occasional snakes. They tanned the skins, sorted feathers and cured manure, adding the manure to their own with dirt laced with mushroom spores. Mushrooms, harvested by feel in the basement ruins, were sorted in the light. Potatoes and onions grew wild. To this diet came the odd deer and coyote.

Sam had been warned not to go down into the ruins. He could not hope to match the local skill for working in total darkness, but there was more to it than mushrooms. Their best water lay in deep pools, a trove of water on a planet that had lost so much. No one wanted Sam to drown in this water and taint it.

He kept to his own room, where he had hides, a feather pillow, quills and a plastic bowl of hen’s-blood ink. A stack of bricks made a writing desk. He wrote a page a day. In return he was fed. Sam wrote *Ben of the Ithaca*. Before finishing it, he showed it to Ben Keyhoe.

“Here is a fine story of your life,” Sam announced.

Ben sat sorting mushrooms, slicing them in half, rolling them in salt and sulphur, scattering them on screens of reed and gut, to be set in the sun.

“Thought it wasn’t finished.”

“The finishing is up to you—when you kill the Chemung.”

Ben trapped the mushrooms between two screens, tied them with braided swamp grass, then shook off the salt and sulphur.

“Then I’ll take it to others to read,” Sam said, “to make them fear you.”

Ben sliced mushrooms, tossed them on a new screen. “Have you made me so frightening, Sam?”

Sam shook his head. "More frightening than any Chemung!"

Ben let his blade tip into the dirt. He wore a wide woven grass hat to shade him. Salt and sulphur caked his black beard.

"We saw canvas today," Ben said. "Our counting party. They should be in tonight. Among them, my wife, I'm willing."

It was the first Ben Keyhoe had spoken of his wife. Ornerly as he felt, Sam said, "You'll be happy to see her again."

"I'll be happy to see her alive." He looked at Sam. "They've been counting your Chemung."

"And you'll attack them?" Sam asked. "So I can write it in the book?"

"Oh, I don't know, Sam. Why don't you just write that I attacked them and killed them all? Then read that to people. You can read it to the Chemung."

Ben sliced mushrooms, trapped them in the screens. Watching, Sam felt old. His lumpy knees ached.

He returned to his room to write:

"And Ben of the Ithaca slew the Chemung, stuck their heads on poles and laughed: 'By thunder, I have won!'"

But Sam knew these Ithaca were not raiders. Not through them would he avenge his people. He would leave when he finished *Ben of the Ithaca*. He gave the ending little thought, patching-in lines from all his books while determining what provisions he would take. Smoked hens and mushrooms would carry him as far as the next friendly tribe.

ANNE'S PARTY ARRIVED AT THE ITHACA CAMP. THE DEER WERE LED TO A STABLE. She told a man there, "Get Ben."

She looked at the lichen-gray hills, prepared to wander back out and die for shame. Last night, for the first time, she had let herself know in words that she loved Ben Keyhoe. The thought had led to others.

Anne Whitfield sat on a rock smoothed, over years, to a natural bench by an entrance to the Ithaca camp. Ben was taking his time coming out. Surely, the first thing they'd told him was that Nell had not returned. The loss of a woman you have loved and lived with for two hundred years, during the worst of times, had its own rhythms, its own adjustments. Anne had scarcely begun to mourn.

As if the ground had swallowed Nell. Exactly as if.

Anne felt her chest quake, her throat tighten. Sliding off the stone bench to her knees, she threw her face into her hands and wept. None of the others went to her but stood watching, not hating her, feeling deeply what she felt but letting her feel it, respecting the anguish appropriate to the loss of so long a life. Others cried too, sympathetically, then quietly

dispersed.

Wept out, she wiped her face, cleared her throat and spat at the feet of a skinny old man.

He had sparse white hair, sad eyes, and stood cloaked in canvas stitched to make a hood. He stared like a large intelligent hen.

She stood, dusted her knees and said, "Sorry. I'm Anne."

"Sam," he said, as if accusing her of something. Often the older ones who wandered in were sick beyond anything the Ithaca could do. But Sam didn't look sick, just ornery.

"Where you from?"

Sam shrugged. "South. Been here a month." Waved his arm. "I have seen God's face twice."

Oh, not one of those, she thought with a feeling of answering her door to a Jehovah's Witness—usually the first sunny day of the year, she recalled, while Mormons might knock at any time, topcoat collars up, breath clouding in the late October sun, as optimistic as The Saved stepping from neat rectangular graves on the *Watchtower* covers.

She cleared her mind. The stuff she recalled!

And inspected Sam. It was just trouble to ask how long he thought he'd be there. When they wandered in, they stayed, drain on resources or not: the Ithaca could not afford wanderers leading others back to raid and pillage.

"Can you work?" she asked.

He drew himself up and glared. "I am a storian."

No, she thought, Jim Wong is an *historian*. You are an old rumor-monger.

But Anne said, "Welcome. You meet everyone?"

Sam nodded. "All but you, and your four—three," he stammered.

Instantly they looked elsewhere, ignoring Nell's ghost.

"You getting enough to eat?" she asked the ground.

He nodded vigorously, showing toothless gums. "Eggs, I like—eggs are a divine revelation." He gestured vaguely.

John the Divine, she filled in. I bet it's like *451*, he's memorized a few plots and goes around repeating them, doesn't even know what they mean.

"Well," said Anne, "you'll have to tell me a story sometime."

She turned to go as Sam said:

"About the Chemung."

Anne stopped. No one had said "Chemung" since her return. It struck her like an arrow. She believed the Chemung had taken Nell, just as Nell had taken a Chemung with an arrow to the chest.



"What about them?"

"Want to kill them all?" he asked.

Okay, she thought as the thunder of his offer rolled away. He's nuts. Forget it. She moved on.

But, suddenly furious, Anne swung back.

"No, I don't want to kill them all. Why would I? Know how many people you're talking about? You mean the women too? In their tents all day, tanning hides, cooking, spreading their legs?"

"Well!" Sam picked his lip, embarrassed.

Anne watched him. "You have any idea how many people died, how few of them are left? The Chemung," she said, "have to be brought along, taught to live right, to settle down. They're human," she said against her will. "Anyway..." Anne felt tears coming. "Talk about it later."

But what had he meant? Anne wondered that night, tending a cook fire. Not that she regretted one word of her rebuke—but what had Sam meant by: "Want to kill them all?" Possibly, he had found an actual weakness that could be exploited. Some magic or fetish? Or a way of separating the Chemung from their herds? To starve them, might be Sam's idea.

But if you got control of them, forced them to a council, made them see—

"Anne?"

Ben stood in the wavering firelight, draped in deer hide and leggings. Like an Iroquois, Anne thought, from a drawing in a book.

"I sit down?" he asked.

She made room. Light wind kept the smoke off.

"Smells good." Ben nodded toward the kettle.

"It's ready, if you like."

"No hurry." He drew his knees up, hugged his bony legs. "You met Sam?"

"Briefly."

Ben nodded. "Doesn't know his butt from a hole in the ground. But you can't tell him anything."

"No." Anne wondered how he would get to Nell. Anne felt the absence of others, knew they were not just hanging back in the shadows but had withdrawn to stone rooms, cellar dung fires. "Sam thinks he's an historian."

"Exactly." Fire gleamed in Ben's eyes. His wild hair took the orange light as if aflame. "Or a minister. He has a *Bible*, a real one. He let me look at it. Belonged to his mom."

Anne felt Ben working toward some point he meant to make.

"You know Cain and Abel? Cain's a farmer, Abel's a shepherd. They both make an offering to God, who rejects Cain's offering, for no reason I could ever see. I read it again. It doesn't make sense, why God turns down one but not the other. He felt like it, apparently. But that's me, the village atheist." He grinned to show Anne it was okay to grin too. Anne grinned faintly. Ben said, "There's that line Cain has when God looks for Abel: 'Am I my brother's keeper?' We've been taught to think the right answer's: Yes—I *am* my brother's keeper—we all are." Ben shook his head. "But it's not that. Abel kept a flock. He was a shepherd—he *kept* sheep. 'Am I my brother's keeper?' was just lip. Cain was mad at God, talked back, told God to shove it. So God marked him and threw him out."

Anne stared at the fire and, believing that she understood him, whispered fiercely, "It's not the same!"

"No, of course not," Ben agreed in that way he had of throwing you off by withdrawing from the carefully stated position: that neither was Anne Whitfield a keeper of sisters, of Nells or other sheep, and Ben Keyhoe was not God.

When Anne thought of nothing to say, Ben said, "I'm in pain. I'm in such pain I can't feel it fully. But I always knew it would be me or her one day, when one of us didn't come back. I'm sorry it's her. Because it means she's dead and I'm the one who still feels."

Ben stood to leave, blending with the darkness. His forgiveness, complete and unexpected, left Anne nowhere to go. Others came to the fire to dip into the kettle, to eat and talk. They mentioned old Sam and his book.

NEXT MORNING, ANNE FOUND SAM. "WHAT'S THIS BOOK ABOUT BEN?"

He blinked, cocking his head exactly like a hen, but took her to his room to show the book, more like a short story in poorly wrought serif letters and English phrases taken from real books. Anne read it. Sam waited.

"There's nothing about Nell," she criticized.

"Never met her."

"And it wasn't a war," she reminded.

Sam pursed his lips.

"Tell me about the Chemung," said Anne.

He told her what he knew from long ago, the night of the raid, the wagon and the boy who had kept climbing out.

"So why don't you write about that?"

Sam shrugged.

Anne said, "Let me see your other books."

He displayed them, carefully untying his canvas satchel. Would not let her touch *Mighty Thor* but did let her hold his *Bible* and even relaxed as she handled *Nuclear, Biological and Chemical Warfare*, it being the sturdiest.

"What if I wanted to kill the Chemung, kill them all? What would I do?"

"Make Ragnarok kill them," Sam said.

"How?" she pressed.

"Biological warfare." He pointed at the book.

"You have any notion what you're saying? Any notion at all?"

"Biologies kill the deer. The Chemung starve dead. The end." Sam took back his book. He disliked this bossy woman.

Anne stood with the handmade *Ben of the Ithaca*, then went to find the real Ben. He was not in his rooms and no one knew where he had gone.

And, at the stable, the deer Anne and her counting party had rustled from the Chemung herds were missing.

"Did they get out?" she asked Mel, who did the skinning and tanning. He said Ben had taken them.

BEN KEYHOE LED THE THREE DEER BY A COMMON RAWHIDE LEASH, PAUSING TO worry some jerky and sip water while the deer nibbled lichen and sedge. Nights he huddled with them tied to his leg. After three days he topped a rise and saw a lake of deer and a small camp of a dozen Chemung talking around a dung fire.

They looked up. One stood. Ben loosed the deer and cocked a lever-action rifle, aimed and dropped the Chemung who had stood. The shot rushed his deer toward the milling herd. A Chemung rifle fired back but wildly. and the man fell with a bullet in his guts. Ben walked in, reloading, and shot the next from twenty yards, the next from fifteen paces, the next man close enough to smell him.

Thousands of little hooves made soft thunder on the lichen-furred land as deer tore in every direction.

Ben drank from a bag near the fire then refilled his canteen. He ate stew from a pot snuggled into the coals then kicked it over and poured water on the cherry-red iron. It cracked with a bang. He started back home, tonguing venison from his teeth.

IN THE COOL DRY ROOMS WHERE MUSHROOMS, POTATOES AND ONIONS WERE stored and hens were hung, Sam loaded the satchel he carried his books in. He took two smoked hens and many dried mushrooms, some onions. He crept down into the blackest tunnels in the hilltop, intending

to make his escape. Soon, according to every reasonable expectation, Sam was hopelessly lost. By the time he thought of turning around he'd begun to feel the monumental weight of the ruins above, like the weight of a mountain. The slick walls dripped. His path was cold and wet. He put a piece of smoked hen in his mouth for comfort, the small eating the smaller, and groped, weighed-down by his books and the food he had stolen. He had no sense of how the path forked or if it doubled back. His only sense was of going deeper into the Earth. The dead were said to inhabit the Earth. Would he meet the dead? Would they rage at his invasion? Or would they be friendly and eager to show him the way to the underground cities said to house old generals and presidents? He hoped so. It was frightfully cold down there. Despairing but dreaming in the dark, Sam blundered on. He was working his way down into the ruins of old Ithaca, when, clutching his satchel, Sam slipped. He shrieked for his mother as he slid into ice-cold water. His feet did not touch bottom. He could not find the walls. He yelled for help but the cold water quickly stilled him. Sam died angrily, knowing that his books, after so many years, were soaked.

#### ANNE BURNED BEN OF THE ITHACA.

The night was clear and the planetary ring of rubble lofted by thousands of meteorites glowed where Earth's shadow did not mask it. Shepherd satellites had cleared gaps in the ring, forming a rainbow of earth tones. The Ithaca had named these shepherd satellites Titus, Carl, Jesse the Body. Recently a new one, and still nameless, had appeared, clearing its own gap within the faint lichen-green ring.

Anne stood burning Sam's book, page after page. She had waited till they saw Ben coming to start burning it, so that he would find her at it. Of course, the book was worthless, not only for being totally untrue but also for its leaves being of cured hen skin, not the harder-to-make deer-skin parchment that lasted longer. Naturally oily, the pages crackled and shrivelled then blossomed into flame like small soft bombs.

Ben stopped other side of the fire, the rifle across both shoulders so that he looked crucified on it, and stared at her. Others too had gathered to stare—Anne had told them what Ben had likely done. Now she asked, not looking at him:

"How soon will the deer start to die?"

And added a page of his bogus life to the flames.

He said, "They ought to be dying already."

The page bloomed.

She asked what pathogen he had infected them with and he told her



what he had managed to concoct, but she was an agronomist and the terms of his own field were a jumble of Latin she didn't bother to work through. So she asked how he had come by the strain, and he said he had isolated it from hen's blood:

"The hens carry it but can't catch it. Naturally," Ben said, "neither can we."

Anne burned another page. "Nell said the Chemung have clogged arteries. Clogged with deer grease. So they don't live long anyway."

Ben nodded. "This'll make 'em healthier. I figure three of every four does will die and half the surviving bucks will be sterile. The Chemung will die-out by half. The rest will need other kinds of food. They'll start killing coyote and get that population under control. Then the Chemung will need what we grow and there'll be fewer of them. We'll trade with 'em. And civilize 'em. Isn't that what you want?"

A page bloomed. "Better not write it down." Anne tore out another page. "Civilize them enough and they'll read what you did to them. You'll be around for them to hang."

Arms hooked over his rifle, Ben Keyhoe dunked his head to laugh. "How many people have ever known what was happening to them? Why the drought made them leave the ancestral valley or what it was that killed the corn? Look at old Sam—he thought the extinction was caused by a war because he read it in a goddamn comic book, Anne! I didn't play god with these people. I played Nature—I played Mutation." He raised his arms, the rifle in one hand. "Tonight, ladies and gentlemen, Ben Keyhoe stars in the role of Chance!"

"Well," she said, "it's good to know you're in there pitching."

"Oh, hell and fireflies!" He turned to go. Stopped. "Where's Sam?"

"He stole some food and ran off," she said. She had torn out nearly all the pages and held them in one fist, the rawhide flaps of the book in the other. "But he went down into the ruins. We haven't found him so he's prob'ly drowned. A rope gang's down there dragging for him."

Ben nodded, staring at his feet. Fire made his shadow bob and weave.

"I had to do something, Anne," Ben told her. "They probably ate Nell. So they ingested some of what she was, what makes us what we are. Most of that is transmissible. Our kids will live forever. You want the Chemung to live forever too? Maybe we should be more democratic—invite them all to dinner."

Anne stood holding the unburned pages.

Ben walked to another smaller fire and sat on a log. Facing the flames, he unlaced his moccasins and rubbed his weary feet. Anne stood taking in what Ben had said then gave the rest of his book to the fire. Skin pages

shrivelled, rawhide smoked.

Shouldn't have done that, she realized. Rawhide's going to get scarce. She reached in, snatched out the curled flaps and left them smoking in the dirt. Anne went to the big kettle, took a bowl and dipped it in the stew, stuck a spoon in and went to sit with Ben. He was sullen.

"Eat," she said. "You must be starved."

Ben Keyhoe ate while Anne gazed at the golden, brick and green rainbow bridge, in which the shepherd satellite they had not yet named patiently cleared a new gap, marking the bridge as a growth ring in a tree marks a year of heavy rain after decades of aching drought. 🍁

---

1. *ad-dict' v. t.* To apply habitually, as one's mind to a speculation; to give (oneself) up or over, as to versifying, as a constant practice...

2. *ad'dict n.* One who is addicted to a habit...

3. *ad-dic'tion n.* State of being addicted; also, habituation...

## 2004 On Spec Theme Issue: "Me & Mr. Jones"

Addiction. It can be as simple as a cigarette, as euphoric as a hit of heroin, or as weird and thrilling as a sexual act. But it runs your life or the life of someone you know. What if it were magical or alien? A substance, a practice or an idea that rules as (so far) nothing else has, and will not be overruled? Love it, hate it. Bend it or break it—but convey it in 6,000 words or less and from outside the envelope. It doesn't have to be a drug with a criminal network to get it to the user. This is *On Spec*, so speculate. Just remember that if you write about addiction and have never been addicted to anything, you will want to talk to or read something by someone who is or has been addicted. (As a smoker, I never felt like an addict; only after I'd quit could I tell past from present.) Anywhere you wish to go is fair, but if you write about pornography addiction, don't send us pornography, and don't send that porn equivalent of tether ball known as "erotica."

Be daring. Visit dark places. But don't pose or brag. Leave the preacher out in the hall along with his friend, the lecturer. Find fictional metaphors that will stand up to inspection. Back addiction into a corner and make it tell you what it knows. Deliver a truth.

Deadline for entries is Feb. 28/04. Address submissions to:

Theme Issue Guest Editor Steve Mohn, *On Spec*, Box 4727, Edmonton AB T6E 5G6.

Sorry, no electronic submissions.

## about our contributors

RANDY D. ASHBURN is an administrative law judge for workers' compensation claims in the Appalachian region of southeastern Ohio, where he lives with his wife and two sons. He spent five years prior to that representing death row inmates on appeal—perfect training for a horror writer, he says. His fiction previously appeared in the Summer 2002 issue of *On Spec* and can be found in anthologies like *The Darker Side*, *Be Very Afraid*, *Fresh Blood*, and *Decadence 2*.

CAROLYN CLINK's speculative poetry has appeared in the Canadian anthologies *Northern Frights*, *Tesseract*, and *Packing Fraction*. Genre poems have also appeared in *Analog*, *On Spec*, *Tales of the Unanticipated*, and *Star\*line*. She is a member of the Science Fiction Poetry Association and the Algonquin Square Table poetry workshop. She is the head of poetry programming for TorCon 3. Junction Books (Toronto) published Carolyn's mainstream chapbook *Changing Planes* in October of 2000. She co-edited the Canadian SF anthology *Tesseract*<sup>6</sup> with her husband Robert J. Sawyer.

PATRICIA DISCHNER lives with her family and writes in Orange, California. She is in the process of submitting her science fiction novel *Dream Disciples* for publication.

A. B. GOELMAN wrote this story while living on the east side of Vancouver. Since then he has relocated to Cambridge, Massachusetts where he is a PhD candidate in Urban Planning at MIT. His story "Lost on the Road" won second prize in the L. Ron Hubbard Writer's of the Future Contest (1<sup>st</sup> Quarter, 2001,) and he participated in the Clarion West Workshop last summer.

MELISSA HARDY was born and raised in Chapel Hill, North Carolina. She graduated from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill with an Honors in Creative Writing, did graduate work at the University of Toronto in history and now lives in Canada, where she works as a Communications Specialist.

Hardy published a first novel, *A Cry of Bees*, at sixteen; a story cycle entitled *Constant Fire*, and a collection of short stories, *The Uncharted Heart*, for which she won the Canadian Author's Association Jubilee Award in 2002. She won the Journey Prize in 1995, and was a finalist in the 1999 Western Magazine Foundation Awards.

Her work has appeared in *Best Canadian Short Stories*, Houghton-Mifflin's *Best American Short Stories of 1999* and *Best American Short Stories of 2001* as well as *The Year's Best Fantasy and Horror*, 2002.



This is TERRY HAYMAN's third *On Spec* story. His work has also appeared in *Altair*, *Dreams of Decadence*, *Clean Sheets*, *Woman's World*, *Boys' Life*, *Grain*, and others. He writes and parents full-time in North Vancouver, B.C.

DARIUSZ JASICZAK, born in 1964 in Poznan (Poland) and educated in philosophy at Poznan University, has been interested in painting since he was sixteen years old. In 1980, he produced his first works in oil pastels and tempera. The turning-point for him was getting to know Giorgio de Chirico's work, which solidified Jasiczak's aesthetic preferences and let him "...repudiate [my] first simple-minded ecstasies over everything that was visionary." Dutch painters taught him respect for good craft in oil technique. He began doing commercial work in applied graphics in 1990 and continues to work in this manner to this day. Besides painting and drawing, Dariusz works with the computer freely mixing 2D and 3D in programs such as Photoshop or Painter, trueSpace, Bryce and Amorphium. His main aim is always to create a good image. Inspired by the masterpieces of Bosch, Bruegel, Moreau, Ernst, Fuchs and others, his work combines the traditional with the new.

CLAUDE LALUMIÈRE is a columnist for *Locus Online* and *The Montreal Gazette* and his criticism appears regularly in periodicals, books, and websites. His fiction has been published in *Interzone*, *The Book of More Flesh*, and others. *Witpunk*, *Open Space: New Canadian Fantastic Fiction*, and *Island Dreams: Montreal Writers of the Fantastic* are some of the anthologies he has edited. In the 1990s, he owned and ran Nebula, Montreal's now-defunct bookshop of the

fantastic, the imaginative, and the weird. His website (lostpages.net) includes links to all his online publications.

STEVE MOHN lives in Montreal, sees too many movies, and talks about them in *On Spec*, *3SF*, and the *New York Review of Science Fiction*. His fiction has run in *On Spec*, *The Third Alternative*, and *CrimeWave*.

JOSHUA PROWSE was so excited to have his first publication credit, he may still be hung over. Until he sells at least one more story, he will continue with his twin careers as self-employed computer geek and eternal teacher's college applicant. He currently lives in Vancouver, British Columbia, but owes his inspiration for "Under a Full Moon" to a certain farm in Ancaster, near his original hometown of Stoney Creek, Ontario. You can find more of his writing at his website: [www.yoursinwriting.com](http://www.yoursinwriting.com).

JENA SNYDER has put together 54 issues of *On Spec*. You can check out her blog ([www.nakedbootleg.blogspot.com](http://www.nakedbootleg.blogspot.com)) for more insights on "the editrix."

CRAIG STRICKLAND was born and raised in Southern California. He lives in a beach town, is married and has two teenaged kids. His tales have been printed in numerous publications, including *Noir*, *Portents*, *Terminal Fright*, *Blood Review*, *Bronte Street*, and *Z Miscellaneous*, to name a few, plus the anthologies *Air Fish* and *October Dreams*. His work will appear in an upcoming issue of *Bare Bones*. Although he concentrates on adult fiction (such as "Meat"), he has also authored two books for middle-readers: *Scary Stories From 1313 Wicked Way* and *Scary Stories For Sleepovers* #8. ♣



# **"In the beginning"**

**Descant Fall 2003**

## **Speculative Literature**

**Including:**

**A Robert Sawyer interview**

**Stories by Nebula Award  
and Pushcart Prize winner  
Bruce Holland Rogers**

**An excerpt from a new novel  
by Hal Niedzviecki**

P.O. Box 314, Station P,  
Toronto, Ontario,  
M5S 2S8 Canada

[www.descant.on.ca](http://www.descant.on.ca)    [descant@web.net](mailto:descant@web.net)

Phone: 416 593 2557    Fax: 416 593 9362

Subscription price: 4 issues \$25.00

# **DESCANT**

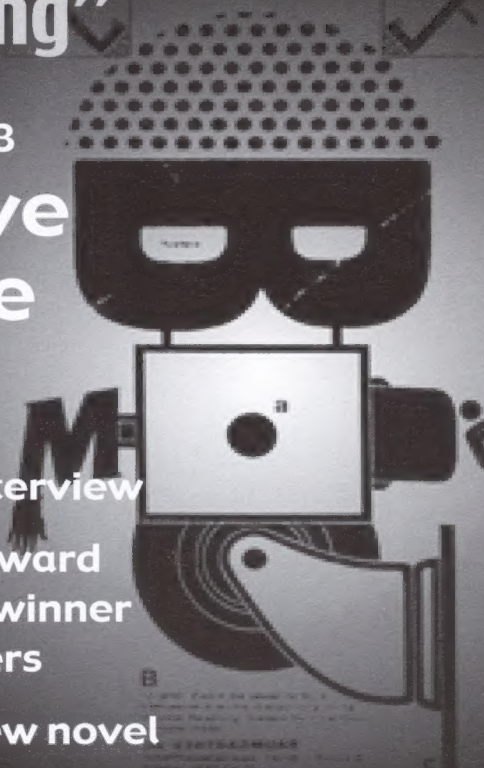


Illustration by Mark Laliberte

# Hockey. Curling. Lacrosse. Beer.

We have our own sports.  
We have our own magazines.

Look for this icon at newsstands or subscribe online to  
hundreds of magazines on every conceivable topic.

[genuinecanadianmagazines.ca](http://genuinecanadianmagazines.ca)



PUBLICATIONS MAIL AGREEMENT NO. 40063520 • REGISTRATION NO. 08148  
RETURN UNDELIVERABLE CANADIAN ADDRESSES TO: ON SPEC, BOX 4727, EDMONTON AB T6E 5G6

DISPLAY TILL DEC 15/03